This paper presents an analysis of key developments in the Chinese mass media from the onset of the post-Mao reforms to the present. It takes as its starting point the conventional hypothesis that media “openness” is a harbinger of political liberalization; and it asks three questions: (1) “What has changed in the organization and operation of China’s mass media since the advent of Deng’s reforms? (2) Are the media more “open” now, and if so, in what ways? and (3) What difference has any of this made politically?”

In the first part of the paper I survey recent developments in Chinese mass media, focusing on four major reform-driven sources of change: (1) the loosening of certain ideological restrictions on media propaganda and “thought work” (which has created greater richness, and diversity in media content; (2) the fiscal and administrative decentralization of media operations (which has made local media outlets and their managers editorially responsible for their own programming content as well as financially responsible for their own
success or failure); (3) the *commercialization* of the media (which has served to shift attention toward the quest for increased market share and advertising revenue as the prime quantitative measures of success; and (4) the *rise of new technologies of electronic communication, particularly the Internet and cellphones* (which has exponentially increased the flow of spontaneous, unscripted and unsupervised information in China).

As a result of the confluence of these four revolutionary forces, the mass media have undergone dramatic changes in the post-reform era. A few factoids:

Since 1979 there has been a ten-fold increase in number of newspapers published in China, a *twenty-fold* increase in magazine titles, and a thirty-fold rise in television and radio outlets—most of which are owned and operated at the sub-provincial level. (the numbers are given in my paper)

In addition to the media’s traditional Leninist mandate to educate, inspire, and motivate the masses, newspapers, magazines and television stations are now routinely expected to entertain, amuse,
excite, and –most important—sell advertising. Even the stodgy old People’s Daily – flagship of the Communist Party’s media empire—has been hard-pressed to improve its bottom line by diversifying and enlivening its content and, starting in the 1990s, spinning-off a series of eye-catching new commercial media ventures.

As newer, more dynamic newspapers have met with success in the marketplace, the old mainstream Party press has lost readership. Between 1990 and 2005, People’s Daily circulation dropped by 40 percent. Meanwhile, the burgeoning tabloid press, including dynamic new regional and local papers such as Beijing’s Xinjing Bao, Southern Metropolitan Daily, Southern Weekend, Beijing Evening News and Beijing Youth Daily, has begun to attract new, generally younger readers with their vivid visual style and lively reportage.

(MSLIDE 2)

Much the same is true of the broadcast media, where the twin forces of fiscal decentralization and commercialization have fostered a tendency for local broadcasters to appeal to the widest (if not the lowest) common denominator of mass taste. This is clearly reflected
in the proliferation of such low-brow, crowd-pleasing TV fare as soap operas, sit-coms, game shows and talent contests.

(SLIDE 3)

While the growing diversity and liveliness of the mass media are obvious pluses, the downside effects of the Chinese media revolution are not hard to find. Along with the tendency to cater to lowered standards of popular taste and culture, in their effort to appeal to a mass audience the media have sharply increased their conveyance of soft news (or “infotainment”)—The dumbing-down of news and commentary is sometimes referred to as “junk journalism”. In China, it is not infrequently infused with overtones of crass patriotic symbolism, resulting in what one media analyst has called an upsurge in journalism characterized by “bread, circuses and the national flag.”

The second negative byproduct of a changing Chinese media environment has been the growing tendency to blur the distinction between news and advertising. In recent years many journalists, encouraged by performance-based pay incentives introduced by
profit-conscious editors, have engaged in the questionable practice of “paid news” -- accepting (or even demanding) cash payments from business firms in exchange for favorable press coverage. Worse yet has been the growing wave of journalistic blackmail, where reporters extort hush money to suppress unfavorable investigative reports.

Finally, since the mid-1990s an increasing trend toward media conglomerations has served to concentrate ownership in some media. One consequence of the trend toward media mergers and acquisitions has been to render the resulting corporate conglomerates—which must answer to the concerns of their financial stakeholders—potentially more, rather than less, sensitive to top-down censorial pressure.

Electronic Media. As remarkable as has been the growth and diversification of China’s print and broadcast media, this pales before the explosion of the new electronic media—principally the Internet. As recently as 15 years ago, China had a total of only six electronic mail systems, each with a maximum capacity of 3,000 e-mailboxes— and no online data services. Today there are over 144 million Internet
users in China, with 85 million individual Chinese IP addresses, 2.9 million registered Internet domain names and more than 750,000 China-hosted websites—along with an estimated 18 million blogs. On average, one new blog is posted in China every second.

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Internet users tend to be younger, better educated, more urban and middle class than non-users. Seventy percent of China’s netizens are under thirty years of age; 59 percent are male; and 54 percent have at least some college education. Saturation is heaviest in major Eastern cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, where between 25 and 30 percent of the population is “wired.”

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**Cellphones and SMS.** When one adds to the veritable blizzard of contemporary on-line communications the extraordinary diffusive capacity of the newest electronic medium to hit China—mobile phone-based short text messaging (SMS)—one can begin to appreciate the full enormity of the Chinese information revolution.
According to industry sources, in 2006 China’s 449 million mobile phone subscribers sent 392 billion text messages – an average of 736,000 messages per minute.

Given the explosive nature of this ongoing information revolution, the state’s propaganda, censorship and security organs have been hard-pressed to keep pace—though they have by no means given up the struggle. Neither the traditional print and broadcast media nor the new electronic media are “free and open” today. On the contrary, in the state’s continuing effort to shape and control the impact of the Information Revolution, the regime’s “media minders” have sharpened their tools of censorship, surveillance and supervision.

While enforcement of content restriction is by no means universally effective or consistent, a substantial array of regulatory mechanisms and sanctions remain available to state agents to restrain and, if restraint fails, to punish those who stray too far, or too often, from official guidelines.

(In my paper I provide fairly detailed descriptions of how content control and censorship operate within each of three concentric media circles—first, the “mainstream” or “core” national media, owned and
operated by organs of the central state and Party (such as PD, CCTV, Xinhua), where content control is exercised most tightly; second, an “intermediate circle”, made up of regionally- and municipally-owned media outlets and trade papers (such as Southern Weekend and the Beijing Youth Daily); and third, an outer circle of “fringe media” made up of local players in the media marketplace--including privately owned magazines, local Internet webhosts, and bloggers, among others. These latter, peripheral, fringe media are the least subject to effective routine surveillance and supervision from above.

In the interest of time I will focus my oral remarks on the regime’s efforts to control Internet content—an undertaking which has proved extremely difficult and problematic.

Under the watchful eye of the Internet Affairs Bureau of the State Council Information Office, tens of thousands of cyber police have been recruited and trained in China in recent years.

(SLIDE 6)

Collectively known as dama (or “Big Mama”), the Internet police have, among other things, cracked down heavily on online political dissent
and unlicensed Internet cafes. And they have recruited thousands of student monitors—or “little sisters”—on college campuses throughout the country to scrutinize postings in chatrooms, bulletin boards and blogsites, and to remind users to observe self-restraint while promoting the regime’s goal of a “Civilized Web.” When self-policing proves ineffective, “little sisters” are expected to report offenders to local cybercops. In an effort to “soften” the image of China’s cyberpolice, two soft and cuddly icons have been created to remind Internet users of their obligation to observe self-restraint-- the eponymous cartoon characters “Jingjing” and “Chacha”

(SLIDE 7)

Major commercial webhosts and Internet portals find themselves under strong pressure to self-censor their own web content. When the head of China’s largest blog host, Bokee.com, was asked to explain why his company voluntarily screened out “offensive” subject matter, he responded in terms of narrow corporate expediency: “We are a commercial company. . . . We have a responsibility to our shareholders. . . . if we allow anyone to publish sensitive content, the whole site will be blocked.” In similar fashion, major global Internet companies like Yahoo, Google and Microsoft have agreed voluntarily
to remove offensive content from their online websites and search engines in order to ensure continued access to China’s fast-growing electronic market.

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Periodically, Chinese authorities resort to heavy-handed tactics to punish (and thereby deter) web-savvy dissidents who challenge the regime’s political strictures by devising evasive techniques such as the use of proxy servers and coded messages to circumvent the fabled “Great Firewall of China”. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 51 Chinese cyber dissidents are currently under detention.

Even personal cellphone communications are subject to official intervention. Major mobile service providers like China Mobile and Unicom routinely post official government “advisory” notices to their subscriber base, for example, warning them, for example, not to participate in mass demonstrations.

_The Beijing Olympics: False Dawn?_ During the prolonged run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Chinese authorities have introduced
certain cosmetic reforms to create the semblance of a more open media environment. Since late last year, for example, foreign journalists have been permitted to travel around the country and conduct interviews without securing prior official permission; and most recently, foreign news services were granted broader access to delegates attending the 2007 annual meeting of the National People’s Congress.

But such cosmetic reforms are misleading. In the last two years there has been a steady stream of sobering media developments, including:

- The closure of the popular investigative journal *Bingdian*, and the firing of its controversial editor, Li Datong.

- The tabling of draft legislation that would impose fines of up to ¥100,000 on media publishing unauthorized reports on natural disasters or other large-scale emergencies and public disturbances.
The arrest and criminal conviction of two reporters from the *Straits Times* and the *New York Times*, for alleged crimes of “espionage,” “fraud,” and the leaking of “official secrets.”

At the end of 2006, Reporters without Borders reported that 31 Chinese journalists were currently in jail on assorted charges;

In its annual year-end Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders in 2006 ranked China 163rd in the world (out of 168 countries)—four slots lower than the previous year.

Finally, earlier this year (2007) state media regulators jointly announced a list of 20 restrictions on topics that could be openly discussed in the mass media. Prohibited subjects included the 1957 anti-rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution, and the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. The stated reason for the ban was to ensure a “harmonious atmosphere” in the run-up to next September’s National Party Congress.
The Limits of State Media Control. Given the wide array of regulatory and coercive weapons available to the state in its ongoing campaign against media openness and dissent, are there any grounds for optimism? The short answer is “yes.”

For one thing, the Information Revolution is proving increasingly difficult to control. Three intertwined problems lie at the root of the state’s media control problem: first is the sheer fragmentation, both vertical and horizontal, of administrative command and control under the decentralization and commercialization reforms introduced in the 1980s and 90s.

Second, are the perverse incentives built into the very structure of principal-agent relations at each level in the media hierarchy. For example, evaluation and promotion of cadres at each level continues to be based principally on their ability to meet (or exceed) specific revenue targets. This bottom-line orientation, in turn, provides a palpable incentive for media managers (and their local state minders) to privilege market success (i.e., profitability) over political and cultural correctness.
Third, and finally, the acephalous nature of the electronic media, in particular the Internet, renders effective, comprehensive top-down command and control increasingly unattainable. Given the staggering (and ever-increasing) volume of electronic messages flying into, out of, and around China at any given moment, total censorship and/or content control of the Internet has become impractical, if not impossible.

Text messaging has proven particularly vulnerable to massive violations of political correctness. In the aftermath of the 2003 SARS epidemic, for example, a wave of sarcastic doggerel was propagated on tens of thousands of mobile phones throughout the country, parodying, among other things, the Party’s inept handling of the outbreak and lampooning Jiang Zemin’s “three represents”.

Even the top-tier of centrally-operated state media no longer refrains from indulging in political parody. This growing irreverence is clearly illustrated by an extraordinary incident filmed at the 2002 CCTV spring festival celebration, where two well-known CCTV news anchors performed on stage a self-satirizing rap on the lack of
honesty and integrity in CCTV programming. Modeled after Chinese rock star Cui Jian’s hit song, *Bushi Wo Bu Mingbai* ("It’s not that I don't understand"), the musical parody proved to be a hit with the audience: [play DVD]

*Civil Society and the Rights Defense Movement.* Further complicating the government’s task of regulating media content has been the emergence of a nascent, self-organizing “civil society” in China. Fueled by the growth of consumer awareness and personal freedom, there has been a substantial expansion in the “public space” available for addressing issues of civic concern in China. Last year (2006) government sources claimed there were over 317,000 civil society associations in China. For the most part, these associations are small in size and narrowly focused on issues of substantive local concern (pollution, poverty, rural education, HIV/AIDS awareness, etc.). And they are mainly non-political. But their rising numbers, and their heightened civic awareness, have visibly enlarged the arena of public discourse where the policies and actions of the state and its agents can be discussed, debated and, with increasing frequency, contested.
(In the paper I give numerous examples of rising civic activism in
such fields as defense of homeowners’ rights, resistance to
predatory rural taxes and fees, environmental protection, and the
rights of migrant workers. And I describe the emergence of the
popular “weiquan” – or “rights defense”—movement in China over the
past few years.)

In conjunction with the rising activism of civil society and the growing
assertiveness of the rights defense movement, Chinese media are
playing an increasingly important role in the exposure of official
malfeasance. Numerous second- and third-tier newspapers and
journals --such as Southern Weekend, China Youth Daily, Southern
Metropolis Daily and Caijing --have published bold investigative
reports—often stimulated by revelations initially circulated on Internet
websites, bulletin boards, and in text messages.

One striking example that well illustrates the newfound efficacy of
media-assisted civil society activism is provided by the recent saga of
Chongqing’s celebrated “dingzihu”, or “nail house”.

[SLIDE 9]
In this extraordinary case, which burst into public consciousness last spring, a Chongqing homeowners’ couple held out against intense pressure, applied by property developers and local government agencies, to accept a token payment for their home under the government’s “right of eminent domain.” Though all of their neighbors had capitulated and moved out to make way for a new real estate development, this one single couple refused to vacate their household without adequate compensation.

Enlisting the support of urban homeowners’ groups, rights defense lawyers and a small army of bloggers and text messagers, the couple parlayed growing public sympathy into a nationwide media blitz. [SLIDE 10] Hundreds of web forums, chatrooms and electronic bulletin boards all over China began providing daily updates of the “nail house” saga, complete with photos of the endangered house—perched atop a tiny spit of land at the center of a gigantic excavation pit.

After the Southern Weekend and a few other investigative journals picked up the story toward the end of March, the nailhouse occupants received a generous financial settlement from embarrassed city
officials; and on March 29, the *China Youth Weekend* (an offshoot of Beijing’s *China Youth Daily*) headlined the story of the “awesome nail house” event and proclaimed it as “the birth of citizen journalism” in China.  [SLIDE 11]

**Conclusion.** While such media giddiness may be a bit premature, we may nonetheless venture a few tentative conclusions about the political impact of China’s ongoing Information Revolution.

First, it seems clear that increases in media pluralism and commercialization have not *easily* or *automatically* produced political liberalization in China. Indeed, the evidence strongly suggests that the Chinese government’s policies toward the media remain decidedly *illiberal*, even after more than a quarter century of market reform.

Second, it is apparent that the state’s strategy of combining greater economic permissiveness and personal freedom with continued, tight control over the flow and content of media information has generally succeeded in retarding the process of political liberalization. (This is in line with the empirical findings of a recent 150-country study published in Foreign Affairs, discussed in my paper)
Third, and despite the Chinese government’s best efforts, there has been a discernible growth in media-amplified civic and rights-oriented activism in recent years. This trend toward an expanding, increasingly “noisy” public sphere is, I suggest, likely to become even more pronounced with the passage of time, as collateral developments in other parts of the Chinese system of governance—e.g., the current legislative drive to strengthen private property rights, and growing pressure toward greater transparency in local government operations—serve to further challenge and circumscribe the presumptive hegemony of the Leninist state.

Fourth, the frequency with which unauthorized, “politically incorrect” media content is propagated tends to increase noticeably as one moves away from the core (mainstream) media toward the periphery. It is at the outer edge of China’s state-civil society frontier that the most persistently unsettling and discordant media voices are heard. One particularly noteworthy example of such political incorrectness is the growing trend of parodying China’s top leaders on the Internet. One recent blog achieved a “twofer” by simultaneously deriding Jiang Zemin’s “theory of the three represents” (sange daibiao lilun) and Hu
Jintao’s more recent concept of the “harmonious society” (hexie shehui).

(SLIDE 12)

Fifth, and more conjecturally, in accordance with the known laws of physics, as social pressure builds at the system’s periphery, we should expect the core political domain to begin to heat up, forcing the central state either to further step up its repressive controls or else move toward some form of liberalization. The fact that even relatively small amounts of civil society activism and media “pushback” have provoked intense, heavy-handed responses from the control apparatus suggests that the state-society equilibrium in China today is tenuous, and lacks long-term meta-stability.

Sixth, as stepped-up repression and coercion of the media exposes the fragility of the underlying system, liberalization will arguably become a more acceptable strategy for Party leaders concerned primarily with their own political survival. I would suggest that in order for liberalization to occur, China’s ruling elites must at some point conclude that liberalization is a less undesirable outcome than the other available alternatives—including escalating civil disobedience,
repression, growing political deligitimization and, ultimately, the possibility of regime failure.

Seventh and finally, political liberalization will require a degree of elite political will --and a leap of elite political faith—that has been utterly lacking in China at least since the events of May-June 1989-- and for very good reason: the most directly relevant precedent available to Chinese leaders to guide them through the hazardous terrain of post-Leninist liberalization is a profoundly negative one—the glasnost'-induced meltdown of the Soviet Union and its European empire.

In a Darwinian universe, species confronted with rapidly changing environmental conditions are free to choose inappropriate, maladaptive behaviors; but the price they pay is likely to be a stiff one: the increased probability of extinction. So it is with Leninist regimes, whose in-built resistance to the free flow of ideas and information must be reckoned a serious obstacle to their own long-term survival in the information age.
With two-thirds of the world’s Communist regimes having been swept away in the “Mass Extinction” of 1989-91, this is no mere liberal delusion, as James Mann has recently suggested.

Since China’s leaders are rational actors, and are not inclined toward deliberate self-destruction, they have already begun to seek more congenial, less potentially disruptive alternatives to the extremes of a return to Maoist brutalism or a leap into the unknown risks of Western political pluralism. These alternative experiments include such hybrid neo-authoritarian hybrid prototypes as “consultative Leninism,” “neo-Confucian societal harmony” and Singapore-style “nanny-state paternalism.”

Still, such a “hedging” strategy, in my opinion, is doomed to fail in the long run, as the relentless, information-driven amplification of civic awareness and activism continues to erode the party-state’s presumptive claim to exclusively grasp political power and unilaterally define political reality. Accordingly, I would suggest that it is not unreasonable to expect that a more open, pluralistic and information-friendly China will begin emerge within a decade or so.
Since China is a vast, rapidly modernizing country facing a unique constellation of daunting developmental challenges, and since in government, as in nature, form ultimately follows function, we should not expect China blindly to adopt Western-style institutions—as Sun Yat-sen did in the short-lived Chinese Republican experiment of 1912-14, or Boris Yeltsin did in early post-Soviet Russia. China will have to find its own pathway out of its current political bind. But whatever institutions are ultimately adopted, they will have to bear the added weight of an increasingly contentious, information-rich and rights-conscious civil society. About the only thing that can be said with confidence at this point is that those institutions will not be Leninist in nature.

Given the existence of multiple sources of uncertainty, no-one can predict with confidence how this drama will play itself out. Some observers place their hopes for a more liberal Chinese political future on the CCP’s emerging fifth-generation leaders, who will come into their own early in the next decade. Others envision—in lieu of democratic political reforms-- an increasingly responsive, albeit
paternalistic Leninist regime (or “nanny state”) successfully applying ad hoc administrative remedies to maintain power and bolster its “authoritarian resilience.” Still others see China caught in a “trapped transition,” doomed to flounder, if not fail, due to deep structural contradictions within its marketized Leninist institutions. And a determined few continue to predict imminent chaos and collapse.

Personally, I am inclined to echo Zhou Enlai’s famous 1972 reposte to Henry Kissinger on the subject of the French Revolution—that it is simply “too soon to tell.” But my gut instinct – never something to bet on—tells me that, in the long run, Wang Ruoshui (the late, crusading editor of the PD) had it right when he observed that “Ultimately, a controlled press is incompatible with the information age.”