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## UPHEAVAL IN CHINA; TV Steps Into the Fray, and Alters It

By E. J. DIONNE JR. MAY 21, 1989

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Nothing so confirmed the power of television as a force in world opinion as the dramatic live broadcasts to the United States on Friday night of Chinese bureaucrats shutting the networks down.

The Chinese officials who burst into the Beijing control room of Cable News Network did not wield guns or wire cutters. That would have looked terrible on television. They bore only the word from the authorities that with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, gone, the networks' work was done.

"Halt your transmission," a bureaucrat said in English as the television cameras carried his every word live. "Now your task is over." But the stern words were undercut by the official's hand wringing and his nervous glances at the camera.

There was no hiding the real reason for the confrontation, or a similar one at the CBS News control room: the Chinese Government's desire not to have the world watch the rebellion of Chinese students that has won support around the world. *Revolutions Are Televised*

One slogan from the American protest movements of the late 1960's declared that "the revolution will not be televised." But in China and the Philippines, and at times in South Africa and on the West Bank, revolutions are being televised and in

the process being transformed. Governments accustomed to controlling just about everything are losing their absolute power over that most vital of political commodities, information.

But the Chinese Government's decision to cut the networks off also showed the limits of media politics, and particularly the limits of the power of Western television to influence events in countries where American influence is weak.

Todd Gitlin, director of the mass communications program at the University of California at Berkeley, said American television coverage mattered much more in societies like the Philippines and Israel, where the United States plays a decisive role, than in places like China, where it does not.

In South Africa, the Pretoria Government, although not dependent on American aid, is sensitive enough to threats to American investment that it has virtually shut off television coverage of anti-apartheid demonstrations.

"Media politics aren't the entirety of politics," Mr. Gitlin said. "In China, forces within the army and the party are far more important." Image Abroad Is Secondary

Robert Lichter, the director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, said "television's primal political power is to mobilize public opinion." Where public opinion matters far less than the wishes of dominant groups like the party and the army, television matters far less.

Andrew Nagorski, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a former reporter for Newsweek in Poland, said dictatorships faced with crises did not care very much about American television networks. "Whenever governments feel their survival is at stake," he said, "the question of their image abroad takes a distant second place to the issue of survival."

Even so, the Chinese Government clearly cared enough about the power of the foreign cameras that it chose to unplug them, following South Africa and Israel in imposing restrictions on journalists covering unrest.

For Wilson Carey McWilliams, a political scientist at Rutgers University, the lesson to the authorities - from Eugene (Bull) Connor, the police commissioner of Birmingham, Ala., during the civil rights movement to Li Peng in China today - is that cameras that are not controlled by a government inevitably become the government's enemy. An 'Almost Accidental' Role

"What the authorities are always trying to argue is that if you tamper with the existing order, you'll get something worse," Mr. McWilliams said. "But you can't

portray whatever that 'something worse' is on television. You can only portray the repression being used by the authorities to put down opponents of the current regime."

"If the case against opponents of the existing regime is right, as in opponents of Jim Crow in the South, the media play a tremendous role," Mr. McWilliams said. "But it's almost accidental."

Mr. Nagorski noted that even in China or in Eastern Europe, where Western influence is minimal, foreign newspaper, radio and television reports can provide crucial sources of information for antigovernment rebels.

Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, calls this "the boomerang effect." Inevitably, foreign news reports are beamed back into a country through the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America or other sources.

Mr. McWilliams said, "Individual regimes get to the point where they can't even control their own country's perception of things, let alone ours."

David Sawyer, an American media consultant who has advised opposition movements in the Philippines, Chile and South Korea and has sought to use American networks to beam messages back to countries where local news organizations would not carry them, said, "In an age of mass communications it's difficult to maintain a totalitarian regime." Published in America First

Mr. Sawyer, who advised Corazon C. Aquino of the Philippines in her campaign to oust President Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1986, said the Aquino strategy rested on getting her charges against Mr. Marcos published in the American press and broadcast on American television first.

"He would never respond if Cory made the charges in the Philippines," Mr. Sawyer said. "But he most certainly responded to the international press, and then the charge became a legitimate issue in the Philippine press."

Mr. Sawyer, who also advises the Israeli Labor Party, said the power of American media was probably greater in Israel than in any other foreign country. This is the case not only because the Israeli Government depends on large amounts of American aid, but also because it relies on popular support from Americans, particularly Jews. He said a major part of the Israeli's reporting of almost every important news story was how it played in American newspapers and on American networks.

Frank Greer, a media consultant who advised the opposition to Chile's leader,

General Augusto Pinochet, in the recent referendum there, said the Chilean government felt obligated to give the opposition the chance to tell its story on Chilean television once American networks and newspapers started to cover the referendum closely.

"When the world turns on its television lights," Mr. Greer said, "it helps open the democratic process." The opposition won the referendum. Signs Printed in English

The Chinese students clearly felt that the American networks' interest in their cause gave them at least some protection. On Thursday, the CBS News program "48 Hours" depicted a group of students applauding the CBS cameras. Many of their signs were printed in English.

Mr. Kalb said he asked a Chinese student at Harvard to explain all the English-language signs. "We're very well aware of the power of the networks," the student replied.

Both Mr. Kalb and Mr. Gitlin said the process of covering a revolution can alter it. "To some extent, the event is changed by having the camera trained on it," Mr. Kalb said. "You might say that they are fashioning the revolution so it's coverable by the American networks."

Clearly the Chinese Government itself had no intention of fashioning its own response to the student rebellion for the benefit of the cameras, and so it threw them out. And judging from the experience of the South Africans, throwing cameras out really does reduce world attention. Deprived of good television pictures, networks around the world have trouble telling even the most compelling stories of repression. Altered American Perceptions

But Mr. Nagorski, the former reporter in Poland, argues that the television pictures in the United States have already altered American perceptions of China in ways that could have an important impact in the long term.

"On China, the West has tended to be a little detached on human rights questions until now," Mr. Nagorski said. "They've been our friends, and there's been a tendency to say that the Chinese were different from Westerners or even from Eastern Europeans in their attitudes toward democracy. That view has been blown out of the water by all of this.

"The television pictures we've seen," he added, "show that the Chinese have the same aspirations as the peoples of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and of any other repressed societies."

Mr. Gitlin said the events in China could have repercussions in Eastern Europe, particularly in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, where Governments have resisted expanding democracy and human rights.

He noted that there were precedents for exporting revolution through news reports. "The analogy to 1968 is not perfect," he said, "but China could be to Eastern Europe as France was to the United States."

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