

Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037

202-223-2942

Volume III, Number 7

September 1989

TV's China Syndrome How the Networks Covered the China Story

How did television news cover the turmoil in China this spring? And how did their crisis reporting compare to coverage in calmer times? We examined 577 stories that the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts aired on China from January 1 through June 30, representing 18 hours 26 minutes of total airtime. In addition, we monitored jokes about China that ran on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night."

Major findings:

■ **Discovering China** - More stories appeared during the month following Gorbachev's May 14 visit than in the entire decade following the 1972 thaw in US-China relations. Gorbachev's five-day visit alone produced more coverage than in all of 1988.

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■ **News Follows Anchors** - Led by on-site Dan Rather, CBS aired almost 90 minutes more total footage than ABC and no-show Peter Jennings.

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■ **Video Violence** - TV news visuals showed demonstrators committing violence nearly as often as the security forces.

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■ **False Spring** - China's good press dropped from 45% positive through May to only 23% positive after the June crackdown.

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■ **The Good News Network** - ABC reporters gave far more positive assessments of Chinese state and society than their CBS and NBC colleagues.

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■ **Nervous Laughter** - China was the focus of one in eight topical jokes on late-night TV during the spring crisis.

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Media Monitor (Copyright 1989) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

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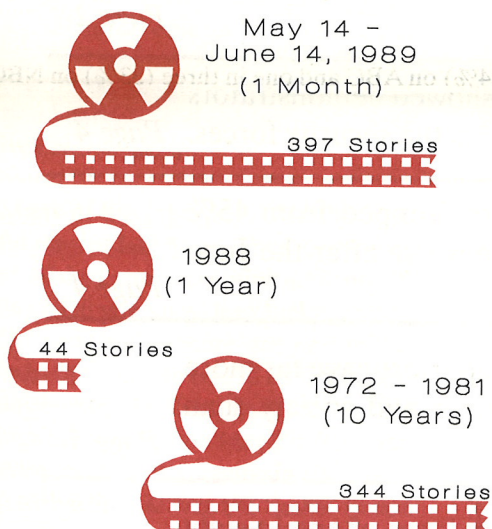
Discovering China

This spring American television cameras focused the eyes of the world on China, as Gorbachev's visit spotlighted a month of protests, crises, and eventual government crack-downs. To analyze the changing media images of China, we examined all 577 stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from January 1 through June 30.

That six-month period covered President Bush's visit in February, violence in Tibet over Chinese rule in March, student demonstrations beginning in April, Gorbachev's visit in May, and the subsequent tug of war between student protesters and party officials ending with the June massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Until mid-May the networks together averaged less than one story per night. Then Gorbachev's visit on May 14 ushered in a month of saturation coverage that concluded when Chinese authorities clamped down on foreign broadcasts in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

How concentrated was the coverage? The networks aired 357 stories in the month from May 14 to June 14, an average of nearly 13 stories per night. That was more stories than they broadcast in the entire decade from 1972 to 1981, when mainland China was "opened" to media inspection after the thaw in U.S. relations.

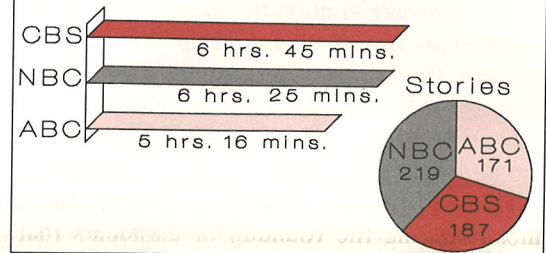
China - Then and Now



"What a place, what a time, what a story!"

- Dan Rather
CBS Evening News

Amount of Coverage



with total airtime of 6 hours 45 minutes. Tom Brokaw arrived almost a month after Rather, and NBC carried 6 hours 25 minutes of coverage. The number of stories on NBC actually exceeded CBS's total with 219. Peter Jennings was a no-show, and ABC pulled up the rear with only 171 stories and 5 hours 16 minutes of coverage - almost 90 minutes less than on CBS.

Making News

TV news loves action, conflict, and a good real life storyline. So it was no surprise that protests and demonstrations made up the largest category of topics covered. Peaceful demonstrations were featured in 179 stories, more than the total of all stories on government activities (156). The media became a major part of the story, as the government's efforts to manipulate domestic and foreign media images were featured 73 times. Thus, China's relations with the media were chronicled more often than its relations with either the American or Soviet governments (42 and 45 stories respectively).

Americans got an unusual opportunity to hear from ordinary Chinese reacting to the tumultuous events in their country, as 54 stories focused on public reaction. The Chinese justice system also came under intense scrutiny after the army crackdown; 37 stories aired in a 21 day period.

"What made the crackdown so startling was...the rosy view of China that had been painted by the media."

- Tom Shales
Washington Post

Media Monitor

Despite television's reputation for magnifying violent events, violent demonstrations (including those in Tibet) failed to make the "top 10" list, attracting only 32 stories.

Major Topics

1. Peaceful Demonstrations	179
2. Government Actions	156
3. Chinese Politics	87
4. Media Manipulation	73
5. U.S. Responses	71
6. Public Reaction	54
7. Relations with U.S.S.R.	45
8. Relations with U.S.	42
9. Justice System	40
10. Economics	38
11. Violent Demonstrations	32

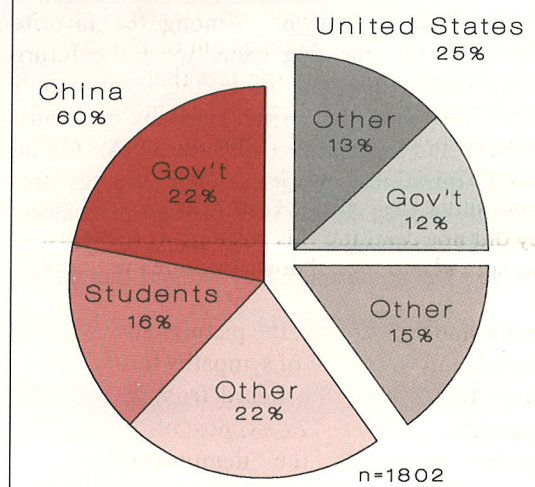
Ordinary People

The networks' presence in China provided a unique opportunity to interview ordinary people and dissidents, as well as the usual government sources. Among 1802 sources quoted, 60% were Chinese, and a solid majority of those were non-government sources. Ordinary citizens, often quoted in man-on-the-street settings or in vignettes about life among the populace, accounted for 22% of all sources. That equalled the exposure given to all government officials and spokesmen, including the government-controlled media. Officials quoted most often were Li Peng (21 times), Deng Xiaoping (19) and Zhao Ziyang (12). The remaining 16% were students involved in protests and demonstrations. If the government-controlled media reports are excluded from the totals, the number of student sources roughly equalled that of government spokesmen. The networks also sought out a variety of dissenting voices. Only 19% of the student sources were identified as "leaders".

An additional one in four individuals quoted were Americans, split about evenly between government and non-government sources. President Bush (32 citations) and Secretary of

State Baker (26) had by far the greatest visibility of U.S. leaders commenting on the events. A substantial minority of non-government sources were Chinese Americans, who made up 3% of the total source list. Other foreign sources accounted for 5% of all citations, led by Soviet leader Gorbachev (13).

Sources



"I can't think of any parallel in human history."

- Charles Kuralt
CBS Sunday Morning

Pictures of Protest

TV news is not only words but pictures. And the pictures in this story were unusually dramatic. To examine the visual aspect of the coverage, we coded every scene shown. In this coding system, the scene changed every time a different camera shot showed a new setting or development. For example, a shot of protesters that cut to another shot of soldiers responding was coded as two scenes. This procedure yielded 10,835 visual scenes of events in China.

The most common scene was one of peaceful protest (2792 visuals), followed by 2520 "contextual" shots establishing the context of events with man-on-the-street interviews, vignettes of life in China, etc. These two categories accounted for almost half of the visuals American audiences saw from China. Pictures of violence, interviews with government officials, and visits by foreign leaders Bush and Gorbachev all fell far behind these totals. In fact, our study demonstrates the degree to which Gorbachev's visit

to Beijing was upstaged by the protesters. The networks showed nearly twice as many pictures of demonstrators as Soviet officials during his visit.

On the other hand, our findings call into question the much-noted use of "sign language" by Chinese protesters who carried English or other foreign language signs aimed at the international media. Signs in English showed up on American TV news 19 times in 154 stories (12%) before Gorbachev left Beijing. Such signs appeared only five times out of 183 stories (3%) thereafter, despite the fact that the number of stories showing Chinese-language signs increased from 61 to 72. Thus, it appears that the demonstrators planned to appeal to international audiences during Gorbachev's visit, but they did not continue this strategy as their protests spread and a crackdown became imminent.

Finally, and surprisingly, the pictures sometimes contradicted the words of sympathy for the protesters that were often heard from American reporters. Among 127 scenes of one-sided violence portrayed, the demonstrators accounted for nearly half (47%), including throwing stones or Molotov cocktails, fist fights, etc. Security force actions made up a slight majority (53%) of violent scenes, such as firing weapons or driving tanks over demonstrator encampments. (These figures exclude a small number of scenes showing violence by both sides, as well as scenes of protest and violence in Tibet.)

The networks varied in their selection of violent visuals. NBC actually showed more shots of protesters than security forces committing violence (58% to 42%). ABC showed slightly more violence by security forces (52% to 48%), and the spread was greater on CBS - 59% by the security forces and only 41% by the demonstrators.

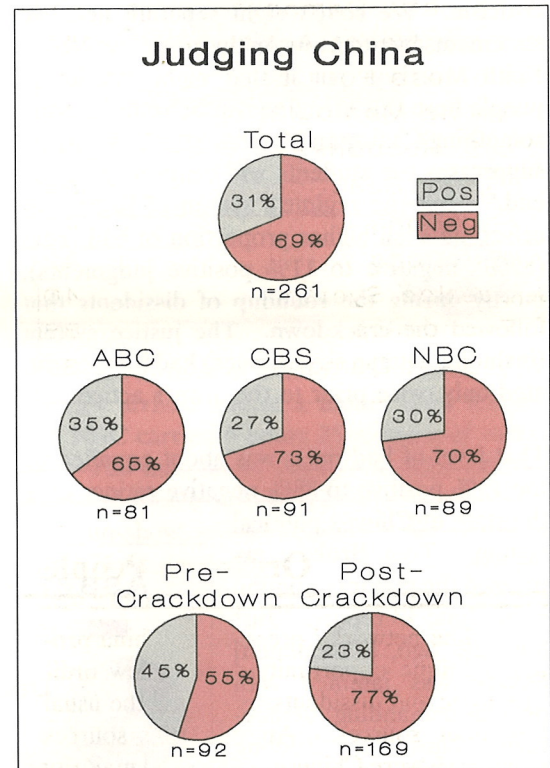
Beijing's False Spring

For China's leaders, an international showcase turned into a public relations disaster. We examined 261 clearly positive or negative statements that reporters and sources directed

toward events or policies in China. The result was overwhelmingly negative, by 69% to 31%. But those totals mask a roller-coaster of coverage that followed the dramatic events of the period and the hopes and fears they engendered. Prior to the April 15 death of Hu Yaobang, a hero to the student protesters, assessments were rare (about one per week) but

"Will this be something like Kent State was for our military?"

- Eric Engberg
"CBS
Nightwatch"



balanced - 47% positive to 53% negative. At that point the coverage shifted from a context of normalcy to one of crisis. The subsequent demonstrations that continued throughout Gorbachev's visit produced a wave of criticism, with comments running about two to one negative (34% to 66%). Commentary took an upswing during the last two weeks in May, as hopes for reform and restraint were aired while the students occupied Tiananmen Square. During this time positive comments actually outweighed negative ones by 62% to 38%.

China's good press ended on June 3 when the army moved in to crush the demonstrations. During the crackdown (June 3-4) criticism outweighed praise by 85% to 15%, and media judgments remained nearly as negative the rest of the month. Overall, the coverage remained relatively balanced prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre - 45% positive to 55% negative from January 1 through June 2. During the rest

of June, assessments were over three to one negative (77% to 23%).

The most frequent point of criticism concerned the authorities' use of force. It was condemned 52 times and defended only 17 times (75% to 25%). All 69 comments occurred after the army moved in on June 3. And reporters felt unusually free to lend their own authority to the criticism. We coded eight separate negative statements by reporters on this topic. As NBC's Keith Morrison put it that night, "A lot of people here this morning will be remembering something Chairman Mao once said: 'Whoever suppresses the students will come to no good end.'" But the regime's system of justice received an even higher proportion of bad press (89% negative to 11% positive judgments), mostly during the roundup of dissidents that followed the crackdown. The justice system (including human rights issues) had been evaluated only twice prior to the army's actions.

That level of bad press was about equalled by the 12% positive to 88% negative ratings over the state of China's political system. Tom Brokaw expressed the majority opinion in his June 13 report: "Just ten days ago, [Tiananmen] Square was jammed with people demanding democracy. Now Mao Zedong looks out on a scene only an authoritarian could love."

The regime did better in coverage of its economic affairs, which ran 58% positive to 42% negative. These figures conceal a somewhat negative view of the current state of the economy, which was balanced by positive judgments of the economic reforms that have been instituted. For example, ABC's Richard Threlkeld reported on May 12, "China's people are better off because of Deng's economic reforms." Moreover, like so much of the coverage, this distinction was time-sensitive. Most discussion of the economic reforms took place during the period of crisis,

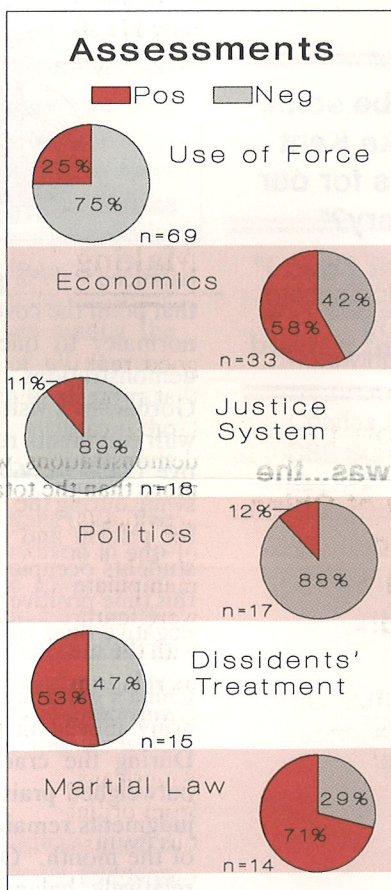
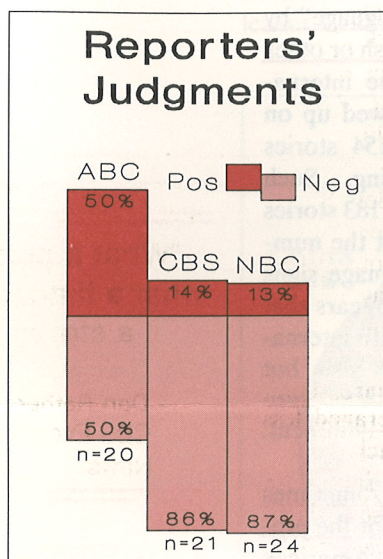
while the state of the economy received the most attention before hunger strikes began.

In the political realm, the authorities' best press came on a surprising topic - the imposition of martial law (10 out of 14 positive comments, or 71%). Several government officials and Chinese media spokesmen made the case for using martial law to maintain order, while few critics of the government addressed the issue. A major reason for this imbalance was the critics' fears of speaking out to foreign reporters. On June 12, for example, ABC's Jim Laurie recounted a conversation with one fearful Chinese citizen: "He put his hand over his heart and said, 'In here I know what happened,' but then putting his hand over his mouth, 'but I will never say.'" Indeed, much of the government's good press on all topics came from its own spokesmen.

Overall, government controlled sources were 89% positive in their assessments, compared to only 22% among all other Chinese sources, 35% among American reporters, and 24% among all other non-Chinese sources.

The three networks were united in criticizing the regime, but there were some differences in degree. CBS was the most critical, with nearly three to one negative judgments (73% to 27%). On NBC the level of criticism was 70% and on ABC it dropped below two to one at 65% bad press. CBS was also most critical of the authorities' use of force, with only one positive comment in seven (14%), compared to about one in four (24%) on ABC and one in three (33%) on NBC.

These overall distinctions, based on all source comments, were reflected in the judgments voiced by journalists themselves. ABC reporters and anchors offered by far the most positive assessments in the aggregate. Their 20 on-camera evaluations of Chinese policies and events were equally divided between praise and criticism. By contrast, CBS and NBC journalists each offered only three positive evaluations, compared to 18 negative evaluations on CBS and 21 on NBC. Thus, journalists' own assessments of state and society ran six to one negative on CBS and seven to one negative on NBC, in contrast to ABC's even split. The good press on



ABC came early; no network reporter offered any positive assessment after the June 3 crackdown.

Back to the Future

The media engaged in far more speculation than evaluation. Among the favorite topics in the guessing game were the future course of the demonstrations, the government's likely response, the impact on the Communist regime and its relations with the USA. On all these questions, reporters and sources frequently hedged their bets by calling the situation unclear or citing more than one possible outcome. But sometimes they hedged themselves

right out of a penetrating insight. For example, Peter Jennings reported on May 26, "we heard a young girl say, 'if Li Peng has more power than the students, we'll be killed.' No American analyst can believe that Li Peng would be so stupid or unfeeling as to resolve the crisis that way."

In the wake of the crackdown, predictions of the system's collapse proved popular. More sources (9) foresaw the death of Communism in China than either a continuation of the status quo or partial liberalization (7). But all these options were dwarfed by the number (17) who pronounced the outcome unclear. Opinion on the future of US-China relations was equally fragmented. Among the 44 forecasts, 9% foresaw improvements, 30% predicted further deterioration, 25% opted for continuation of the status quo, and 36% found the picture too hazy to choose.

LAST LAUGHS

Despite its somber outcome, the China story became a major source of topical humor for comedians on late night television. From May 22 through June 30, 48 China jokes were featured on the opening monologues of NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night." During that time, events in China accounted for one out of every eight jokes on current affairs by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. That made China the fifth most joked-about topic on late-night TV for the first half of 1989, after oil spills, Iran, John Tower's Senate confirmation hearings, and the Iran-contra/Oliver North affair.

Many of the jokes reflected the hopeful days of late May. Thus, Carson admonished an unreceptive audience (5/26), "Do you know how lucky you are? Do you realize there are one million students going to bed in China without any comedy?" Leno had a more ideological comment on May 22: "Communism is a pretty confusing ideology. (Gorbachev) leaves the Soviet Union

David Letterman's Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans

- 10) We're cracking down on dull vacations!
- 9) We'll throw another dissident on the barbie!
- 8) There's an outside chance you'll see Dan Rather clubbed senseless.
- 7) We'll steal your heart and confiscate your film.
- 6) Remember how you used to like our cute pandas?
- 5) Free interrogation and beating with valid student I.D.
- 4) Visit the Szechuan county fair with special guest star Mac Davis.
- 3) Democracy: never had it, never will!
- 2) When it comes to fun, we beat everybody!
- 1) Ba-boom! Ba-ding! Beijing!

where there are thousands of starving people and he goes to China where there are thousands of students on a hunger strike." But many of the jokes were apolitical. Letterman claimed (5/24), "The whole thing in China is over, all the students went home. Turned out it was just spring break." And Leno cracked (6/1), "China is the worst place to go on a hunger strike because if you don't eat, an hour later you don't eat again."

The festive air ended after June 3 as Carson and Leno turned to less tragic topics. On "Late Night", however, the humor turned black. Letterman twitted official reluctance to admit to armed intervention with his "Top Ten Announcements by the Chinese Government" (6/21). They included, "the tanks were just here to do a little light moving;" and "there better not be any more protests like the one that didn't take place last month." Most telling though, were his "Top Ten Chinese Tourist Slogans" (6/15, see box).