Recent restrictions on users of Weibo, China’s leading microblogging service, underscore a battle over the “guidance” of public opinion that dates back over 25 years. China’s Communist Party leaders have overseen massive growth in the Internet while constantly battling to keep independent voices at bay.

Media analyst David Bandurski looks at his own experience with Weibo and the shifting battle lines to control free speech.

“Weibo is in trouble.” That was the conclusion of one veteran Chinese newspaper editor recently when he asked for his thoughts about social media in China. “We’ve all migrated to WeChat,” he said. There were nods of sober agreement from the other Chinese journalists around the table.

I too could relate to the editor’s remarks. Once an active user of Sina Weibo, China’s most popular microblogging service, I had transitioned in mid-2013 to WeChat, the private text and voice messaging service run by Chinese tech giant Tencent. For more than two years, I had accepted some level of content restrictions as a necessary condition of engaging with friends and “fans” inside China. But censorship on Weibo had become far too intrusive. Even images I posted without text that could be culled for “objectionable” terms vanished within minutes. A machine-generated notice would pop up in my inbox, the eyeball logo of the Nasdaq-listed Sina Corporation wearing a blue policeman’s cap, and the words: “We’re sorry; your post… has been made inactive” terms vanished within minutes. A machine-generated notice would pop up in my inbox, the eyeball logo of the Nasdaq-listed Sina Corporation wearing a blue policeman’s cap, and the words: “We’re sorry; your post… has been made inactive” terms vanished within minutes. A machine-generated notice would pop up in my inbox, the eyeball logo of the Nasdaq-listed Sina Corporation wearing a blue policeman’s cap, and the words: “We’re sorry; your post… has been made inactive.”

But even as those of us around the lunch table lamented Weibo’s loss of vigor, Weibo Corporation was basking in the afterglow of its April initial public offering on New York’s Nasdaq exchange, in which it had raised $284 million.1 Weibo’s first quarter results had shown “active users” spiking by 34 percent to more than 143 million.2 So which is it? Is Weibo really in trouble, or is it a service with a future worth investing in?

In fact, the answer to this question concerns not just the share price of the new Sina spin-off, Weibo Corporation, but the saleability of a creed that has lain at the heart of Chinese media policy since the 1990s — flourishing media markets and political control of information can coexist peacefully.

Over the past 20 years, the development of China’s media sector has been driven in large part by its economic engagement with the rest of the world. But that development has always occurred alongside an ambitious project of containment. China spurs change and invests in the infrastructure to make it happen — for example, $630 billion in Internet infrastructure spending from 1997 to 20093 — and it then doubles down on the technology and manpower required to constrain the often unpredictable social and political consequences of change. According to one estimate, spending on the Great Firewall, just one part of China’s vast technical system for Internet control, was $770 million in 2001-2002 alone, its first year of operation.4

US President Bill Clinton declared famously in 2000 that China’s attempts to control the decentralized medium of the Internet were “sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.”5 For Clinton, the Internet was a viscous marketplace of ideas that would always wriggle free of tyranny. “In the knowledge economy, economic innovation and political empowerment, whether anyone likes it or not, will inevitably go hand in hand,” he said. But the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders beg to differ. They want a marketplace of their ideas — to mold the Jell-O, as it were — a process for which they have a special phrase: “public opinion guidance.”

CONTROL VS. COMMERCIALIZATION
We can begin to understand the predicament facing social media in China today by looking back at how print media and the Internet developed and
were constrained from the 1990s to the dawning of China's mass social media era in 2009.

The idea that media control is essential to political stability dates back 25 years to the June 4, 1989, crackdown on student demonstrations. In the wake of June 4, CCP hard-liners blamed much of the unrest on Zhao Ziyang's laissez-faire approach to the press, saying he had encouraged journalists to take the side of the demonstrators and "guided matters in the direction of chaos."

The 1990s opened, then, as an era of intensified media controls. So-called "propaganda discipline" was enforced (as today) through directives sent down by the Central Propaganda Department and local censorship organs. These directives instructed media, variously, to stay clear of a story altogether, avoid any insinuation of government responsibility or use only the official "facts" as given by the official Xinhua News Agency.

But by mid-decade, breakneck economic growth and wider social change drove the transformation of Chinese media despite discipline and "guidance." The reasons for commercialization in the 1990s are complex, but as state subsidies were pulled from media, they were compelled to compete in the marketplace, fighting for advertising and circulation. In a bid to stay solvent, newspapers run directly by party organs launched commercial publications that could be hugely profitable. Soon, "small papers supporting big papers" — or commercial tabloids underwriting party mouthpieces — was widespread. Foreign news media never gained access to China's market, but another factor driving media reform in the 1990s was the non-specific threat of foreign competition, particularly ahead of accession to the World Trade Organization.

As Chinese media moved further into the restrained market in the 1990s, the media's role grew more complicated. Though ultimately answerable to their CCP overlords, commercial newspapers and magazines now also had an obligation to serve their readers and advertisers. A new era of choice had arrived.

In 2002, when Hu Jintao came to power, the idea that media should commercialize while maintaining strict discipline became official policy. The "Three Closenesses" — cleaving to truth, life and the masses — was party-speak for appealing and relevant media content that stayed safely in-bounds. The policy was introduced in large part because it was by this point already painfully clear that "party media faced a serious challenge from the agendas of commercial media." How could media that had little or no appeal hope to mold public opinion?

In this electrified new commercial media environment, an older tradition of journalistic professionalism — embodied in more freewheeling newspapers of the 1980s like Shanghai's World Economic Herald — found new and fertile ground. More audacious journalists strategically pushed the boundaries, finding opportunities despite restrictions. By the end of the decade, even investigative journalism was on the rise. As the new century dawned, it seemed the newly professional Chinese media were edging toward becoming voices for the public interest.

By the time Hu Jintao took office, China's media had undergone a decade of transformation. Across the country, hundreds of newspapers and magazines had been launched. Moreover, large-scale web portals like Sina, Sohu and NetEase were gaining popularity. The sites did not produce news, but by aggregating local news content they could give instant national play to the "lineball" coverage of commercial papers, stories that pushed the bounds. They also offered users an unprecedented opportunity to comment on the news.

**BATTING PUBLIC OPINION**

By 2003, this media transformation had wrecked the CCP's project of public opinion guidance. Briefly, Clinton's Jell-O remark looked prophetic. There were many big stories that year, including the SARS outbreak, but the most emblematic of the media's new agenda-setting role was the Sun Zhigang incident.

When the Guangzhou tabloid Southern Metropolis Daily exposed the death in police custody of a young rural migrant detained for not carrying his urban residency papers, the story (pictured in sister paper Southern Weekend) spread like wildfire through China's major Internet portals, emboldening other newspapers to follow suit. As propaganda officials struggled to play catch-up, a national debate raged over the evils of the country's law on the detention and repatriation of rural migrants in the cities, which was eventually repealed.

Spring 2003 was a jarring wake-up call for the Chinese Communist Party. The next six years of media policy, spanning China's hosting of the Olympic Games in 2008, can be seen as the CCP's remolding of a media industry that had become misshapen, a reassertion of "correct guidance of public opinion."

The 2000s were essentially a drawn-out crackdown on the commercial press. In September 2004, the Central Party Office issued a document formally banning the practice of cross-regional reporting, by which a newspaper from Guangzhou, for example, might investigate a story in another province, thereby minimizing political risk. Chinese media educator Zhan Jiang wrote that in the wake of the ban "investigative reports... virtually came to a stop."**9**

In January 2007, during a special meeting of the Politburo, Hu urged leaders to "use" and "manage" the commercial Internet. The policy announcement by Xinhua was pinned to the top...
of major sites like Sina and Sohu for more than 24 hours. The CCP would now actively use commercial websites as vehicles for its own propaganda, rather than simply restricting their activities. In 2008, outlining his first full-blown media strategy for dealing with online media, the seeds of turmoil were sown once again.

Blogs, which had developed rapidly in China after 2004, had already radically changed the relationship between media and their audience by inaugurating a new era of user-generated content. Writing about China's blog revolution in The New York Times that year, Nicholas Kristof trotted out Clinton's old credo—that the Internet would transform China. In “Death By a Thousand Blogs,” Kristof suggested that “it’s the Chinese leadership itself that is digging the Communist Party’s grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband.”

But microblogs, which enabled a much broader base of mobile-enabled users to post small content items, or “microposts,” in real time, were to prove far more disruptive than blogs, which could be monitored, filtered and blocked with relative ease. Facebook and Twitter, launched in 2004 and 2006, respectively, were both initially available in China. But the concept of social media was still quite alien at the time, and the capacity of these new media to galvanize attention in real time had not yet been widely demonstrated.

A number of Twitter-like clones were launched in China between April and July of 2007—including Jiawai, Fanfou, Zuosa and Digu. These early attempts never gathered momentum, in part because the smartphone revolution that would make social media usage so pervasive had not yet happened—the iPhone only launched in 2007 and the Android platform not until the following year.

Everything changed in 2009, as smartphone-empowered microblogging became crucial to the organization of political movements in Molodova—the so-called Grape Revolution—and later, in Iran, where Twitter helped organize opposition protests to election irregularities. On June 24, 2009, as protests continued in Iran, the idea of microblogging was still so remote that the official China News Service felt obliged to include an “Editor’s Note” in a wire story about Iran:

“What do 140 characters mean?”

Over the past week this question has been hotly debated by media around the world. 140 characters is the length restriction placed on users posting from Twitter, the social media site now taking the world by storm (Editor’s Note: This is a microblogging site). In English, 140 characters is just two or three sentences. But it’s these short posts, constantly made online, that have continued to fuel the upheaval in Iran in the wake of recent elections.

The storm, in fact, was just on the horizon for China’s leaders. Just days before the China News Service report, protests had broken out in the city of Shishou in Hubei province after news spread online of a suspected cover-up in the death of a local hotel employee. When protesters clashed with riot police, the incident spiraled into a mass riot involving tens of thousands. Over the first 72 hours, there were just three mainstream news reports reflecting the government’s position, according to a subsequent analysis on People’s Daily Online. During the same period, “incredibly,” a single user of the Fanfou service had made 140 posts from the scene of the unrest. The megaphone was suddenly grabbed back.

The moment of reckoning came in July 2009, as riots broke out between Han Chinese and ethnic Uighurs in Urumqi, the capital of the northwest region of Xinjiang. Twitter and YouTube were instrumental in the real-time sharing of information from the ground, so much so that social media became a crucial element of the story. “China Riots: Twitter and YouTube Frustrate ‘Censorship Attempts’,” reported British newspaper The Daily Telegraph.

As propaganda authorities struggled to manage the story through diktats to mainstream media and internet news sites, audiences around the world watched videos and images shared through
Fanfou and Twitter of burning police vehicles, or men striding through the streets of Urumqi armed with clubs and shovels. Within days, all four of China’s first-generation microblogging services were shuttered. On August 7, Twitter and Facebook became inaccessible in China.

The Urumqi riots marked the seminal moment when the CCP awakened to social media’s potential to undermine “public opinion guidance.” It also marked the true beginning of the social media era in China, despite the wholesale destruction of first-generation Chinese microblogging services. In August 2009, from the ashes of the Urumqi riots, China’s first mass-audience microblogging service, Sina Weibo, was born.

WHAT WEIBO MEANS

Sina Weibo’s earliest growth strategy was to attract celebrities — as well as public intellectuals, businessmen and so on — who could draw mass audiences to the service.15 Many of the scholars, celebrities and journalists who would move over to Sina Weibo had already been writing blogs on the Sina platform.16 The service worked closely with Chinese authorities to filter search results and block unwanted content, but the opportunity for instantaneous posting and networking was infectious. Sina Weibo’s growth was stratospheric: 1 million users in the first two months; 10 million after eight months; 50 million in the first year; 500 million by the end of 2012.17

By the time I joined in 2010, the atmosphere on Weibo was electric. Stories from all over the country bubbled to the surface: forced demolitions, police violence, reports of propaganda bands — just about anything you could imagine. For a specialist in Chinese media, space and time were no longer limitations. I could connect with hundreds of journalists and learn what they were experiencing, thinking, watching, working on. And something else happened, something totally unforeseen, that brought home just how much Weibo allowed me to reach inside the universe of Chinese communication that until then I had only watched from the outside. Like the Chinese users I conversed with, I too could experience state censorship. That, more than anything, enabled me to feel the borderless power of microblogging. It was exhilarating at first, the ter cross-departmental deployment of my ideas to fool the blind Cyclops of state censorship, like an Odysseus tying his ideas to the bellies of sheep. How could I express this or that idea while avoiding sensitive keywords? After a while, however, the frustration was more keen than the challenge. It was unsettling that the Cyclops could have such a grip on my mind.

In 2010, eventually dubbed the “inaugural year of the microblog” by Chinese media,18 the power of Weibo to impact news coverage and drive public agendas was clearly in evidence. Among other stories, microblogs played a crucial role in the Yihuang self-immolation case in Guangxi province, in which three villagers set fire to themselves to protest the forced demolition of their home. As two relatives of the victims tried to board a plane to Beijing to seek relief from the central government, they were intercepted by a horde of local police. Hiding in the women’s restroom, they called a reporter from Phoenix Weekly, who made “live” microblog posts of the incident, reaching an audience of millions.19 Weibo also had a unique capacity for kicking up scandals, as when a young professor named Wu Danhong exposed false claims made by a prominent businessman, Wu Jinyong, on his resume.20 Control was ever-present on Sina Weibo from the beginning. Wu Danhong’s account, for example, was suspended in August 2010.21 But Chinese officials were still trying to work out the implications of social media. Just as Hu Jintao’s “Three Closenesses” had suggested that party

newspapers might follow the example of commercial newspapers and find a happy middle ground between “guidance” and popular appeal, some argued that microblogs could actually be used by the government as “a platform to connect with the masses.”22

Monitored though it was, however, Weibo was a marketplace open to all. During its first three years of operation, it was possible to say that Weibo was “much freer than traditional media.”23 Users found endless ways to work around controls — and they sometimes had help. For example, a number of services began that enabled users to instantly convert entire swatches of text into JPEG format images, which could then be posted and elude automated keyword blocks. And as fast as sensitive keywords were defined, users found witty alternatives. This was not unlike the way feistier journalists in the heady days of the commercial newspaper revolution found ways to work through controls, sometimes called “dancing with shackles.” Only now, millions of Chinese were dancing in their shackles.

One of the biggest problems was that a new group of influencers had emerged. Known as the “Big V” (the V meaning “verified”), these account holders were well-known microbloggers from diverse backgrounds — including scholars, journalists, businessmen and lawyers — with a disproportionate capacity to influence public opinion. They generally had “fans” running into the millions. To put the problem into perspective, just consider that in March 2011 Sichuan’s provincial government had 240,000 Weibo “fans,” while Wang Keging, an investigative reporter, had more than 250,000.24 And Wang’s following was dwarfed by that of others, such as former Google China CEO Kai-fu Lee, who had more than 33 million “fans” by January 2012.25

Just as thinkers within the CCP had sounded warnings at the turn of the century about the
challenges posed by commercial newspapers, Weibo and other “new media” now became a focus of serious concern. Gao Xinxin, a professor at the Central Party School, warned:

New media have already become collection and distribution centers for thought, culture and information, and tools for the amplification of public opinion in society. They are a direct challenge to the Party’s thought leadership and to traditional methods of channeling public opinion. Traditional thought and education originate at the upper levels, with the representatives of organizations, but in the Internet age anyone can voice their views and influence others. 20

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
The culmination came in January 2013, as the though-provoking Southern Weekly newspaper became one of the first key tests of the new Xi Jinping administration. There were eerie parallels to China’s SARS and Sun Zhigang moment in 2003, almost exactly 10 years earlier. Only this time, the catalyzing issue was the paralyzing of China’s commercial newspapers. Faced with what was an unprecedented level of control — including an aggressive system of prior censorship — journalists at the paper took to Weibo. The staff walkout became a social media flashpoint. Users denounced propaganda organs, posting photographs of themselves holding up signs that read: “I support Southern Weekly.” 21

Internal accounts appeared on Weibo detailing how propaganda officials had gutted the newspaper’s New Year editorial on the importance of “constitutionalism,” even appending their own introduction to the annual special issue, a grievous insult to a publication that still prided itself on its liberal tradition. 22

One of the chief tests of Xi Jinping’s first year in office was to bring Weibo to heel. The first salvo was to neutralize and deter Weibo’s “big V” account holders, who had the power to drive public opinion. In August 2013, American investor and Big V Charles Xue was arrested in Beijing, allegedly for soliciting a prostitute. Underlining that Xue’s arrest had other motives, Xinhua said: “The Internet Big V ‘Xue Manzi’ has toppled from the sacred altar. This has sounded a warning bell about the law to all Big Vs on the Internet.” 23

On Sep. 11, 2013, China’s Supreme People’s Court introduced a legal interpretation of the crime of libel and defamation that included online speech, saying users whose microblog posts were viewed by at least 5,000 users, or forwarded by 500 or more, could face prosecution and jail time. 24

China’s assault on Weibo has continued this year. In April, just as Weibo was preparing its list of “big V” users, 25 a user who has been in prison for three years in prison for allegedly spreading false information. 26 While Weibo claims that its base of “active users” has grown, there are some measures that suggest the service is, as claimed by the editor I spoke to, “in trouble.”

A study published by Fu King-wa, my colleague at the University of Hong Kong, found that 86.9 percent of Weibo users had not made a single original post over a seven-day period. Moreover, a minuscule minority of users, 4.8 percent, were responsible for the bulk (more than 80 percent) of content. 27 That makes it doubly concerning that the “Big Vs” should be targeted and are leaving the service. And while Weibo claims its daily “active users” — those on at least once a day — rose to 66.6 million by the end of March this year, Professor Fu’s study suggests that a much smaller number of users are actually engaging actively with the service. 28

Like the Chinese journalists around our lunch table, I would certainly count as an “active” user simply because the Weibo application was installed on my mobile. But I was considerably less active than before.

According to a yearlong Weibo study conducted on behalf of The Daily Telegraph, the number of posts made to Weibo fell as much as 70 percent after the CCP launched its sustained attack on “Big V” users. 29 Professor Fu’s study tells us just how important a popular minority of users, the Big Vs, are to Weibo — they are the life, as it were, of the party. Meanwhile, the Daily Telegraph study shows us quite graphically what happens when bouncers storm into a party and throw the hosts out into the back alley.

BE HAPPY IN CHAINS
The CCP persists in its faith that China can enjoy the full benefits of a competitive media marketplace while keeping speech in shackles. For officials, it seems a symbiotic position: “Big V” users are seen as a threat to survival for Big Vs themselves. China has the world’s largest online population and largest media market. It had 564 million Internet users by the end of 2013, more than 42 percent of the population. 30 There are close to 2,000 newspapers in the country, versus just a few hundred two decades ago. 31 In February, US Secretary of State John Kerry met with prominent Chinese bloggers in Beijing and said China’s economy “will be stronger with greater freedom of the Internet.” 32 Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the foreign ministry, shrugged off his remarks: “If China’s Internet had not gone through enormous development in the past few years, then where would these bloggers have come from?”

If big numbers equaled big diversity, China could boast a media market that had no equal. But how can you foster vibrant and profitable media when your newspapers are distanced from their own readers? How can you create dynamic social media when the millions who take to them are criminalized by what they say?

For me, China’s anti-social shift was symbolized by the crackdown on Weibo that drove me into the arms of WeChat, the private text and voice messaging service. Together, the services were like the boisterous Chinese restaurant where the Chinese journalists and I were having lunch. Around the tables in the open dining area, hundreds of conversations crisscrossed, a cacophony of voices. That was Weibo — open, public. Off in the wings were the private dining rooms, where small groups could close the doors against the madness outside. That was WeChat, where many of us had taken refuge in private groups of shared interests. WeChat was social too, but the public conversation had suffered as we left the open dining area.

We ended our lunch that afternoon with a pledge that had become second nature to all of us: “We’ll keep in touch over WeChaters.” I was so impressed with the clock was ticking, and that three days later state media would announce a new crackdown on the WeChat service. 33 So much for our private dining rooms.