

China gives press more freedom -- for food safety

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Chinese residents try to tell counterfeit cooking oil products from the real products during an event to promote awareness of economic crimes in Beijing, China, Sunday, May 15, 2011. The headlines are unrelenting: toxic bean sprouts, filthy oil, drug-tainted pork. For months, Chinese media have been churning out a queasy-making multitude of stories about the dangers lurking in the nation's dinner bowls. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) -- Toxic bean sprouts, filthy cooking oil, drug-tainted pork: The relentless headlines in Chinese media have churned up queasy feelings for months about the dangers lurking in the nation's dinner bowls.

The stories are grim reading but show China's usually strict censors are allowing the press more latitude to help it monitor a food industry long riddled with problems.

The central government has been cautiously encouraging a sudden burst in food safety muckraking. That's in contrast to before the new food safety campaign, when local officials would delay or quash reporting on food safety or the provincial government had to give permission for coverage of food scandals, said Peter Leedham, a China-based food testing executive.

"It was very tightly controlled. That seems to have gone now. There's much more openness," said Leedham, the managing director of Eurofins Technology Service in Suzhou.

Few think the looser controls on food reporting signal a broader reform of Chinese media, which remains strictly controlled by the ruling Communist Party. Blogging and publishing are also muzzled, and those who challenge the government risk being harassed or detained. Some, like the writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, have been convicted of inciting to subvert state power for their dissident writings. Liu is currently serving an 11-year prison term.

"Is it a U.S.-style openness?" said Christopher Hickey, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's country director for China. "Clearly not, but I do think it's one of these areas where there is a limited amount of freedom, more than there was in the past."

Chang Ping, a former columnist fired from the gutsy Southern Metropolis Weekly for his critiques, said reporters have long had a freer hand on food troubles as long as they portray them as isolated rather, than systemic problems.

"The reports may look very free, but in fact they don't push anyone to really consider the root causes of what's going on," said Chang.

Still, the shift underscores official alarm over the scope of China's food

safety problem and a recognition that government inspectors alone aren't going to be able to tackle it.

Zhang Yong, the director of the executive office of the new Cabinet-level Food Safety Commission, recently praised the media's "important watchdog role" after being asked why journalists have frequently able to find food safety problems before inspectors.

Many challenges lie in the way of cleaning up the rampant use of illegal additives and drugs, which are often churned out by makeshift chemical factories, making them particularly hard to trace.

Too many agencies oversee food safety, penalties for violations are too light and local officials lack sufficient incentives to crackdown on businesses in their area that produce bad food.

The problems persist despite a crisis in 2008 when six babies died and 300,000 were sickened from drinking infant formula or other dairy tainted with the industrial chemical melamine. The scandal prompted the government to overhaul how it polices food, forming a Cabinet-level food safety commission and passing a comprehensive new food safety law.

"The melamine scandal really served as a real wake-up call in the area of [food safety](#) both for the Chinese public and the Chinese government," said Hickey, the U.S. FDA official.

In response, the government introduced reforms that addressed a patchwork of imprecise and out-of-date standards, promised stepped-up food chain supervision from farm to fork and scrapped inspection exemptions for "famous brands." But since the government doesn't release detailed data about outbreaks of food-related illness, or product recalls, it's hard to chart progress.

The latest wave in media coverage has zeroed in on parts of the fast growing food industry.

In early March state broadcaster China Central Television ran a segment on its 'Weekly Quality Report' show revealing that pork from Henan Shuanghui, the country's largest meat producer, contained the banned drug clenbuterol.

After the news broke, Shenzhen-listed Shuanghui's shares plunged 10 percent and the government ordered nationwide inspections of pork to ferret out other stocks tainted with the drug, which speeds up the conversion of fat to muscle, producing leaner meat but that can cause health problems for humans. Henan authorities also announced they had detained 95 suspects for manufacturing, selling or using clenbuterol.

A similar hidden camera report on another CCTV channel a month later revealed how a steamed bun factory in Shanghai was taking expired bread, mixing it with food coloring and sweeteners and repackaging it. The Shanghai Shenglu food plant was closed, five Shenglu managers detained and a districtwide inspection was ordered as a result.

Provincial media have catalogued pesticide-tainted leeks in Qingdao, the coastal resort city famous for its Tsingtao beer, and bean sprouts soaked in chemicals to make them grow fatter and appear fresher in the northeastern province of Liaoning.

Caixin Media, one of China's most daring media outlets ran a story about cadmium-tainted rice in February, citing researchers at the Nanjing Agricultural University who estimated that as much as 10 percent of China's rice could be tainted with the poisonous metal.

Caixin's opinion desk editor Yang Zheyu said it went out without a hitch though they did get some "pressure" afterwards.

"We didn't have a lot of pressure but there was some," Yang said. "It's not convenient for me to go into specifics about that, but our report got out and that was our goal, so we were satisfied."

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