



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Journalism ethics council rebukes Belgian newspaper for ethical misconduct in the publication of Chinese official propaganda

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Brussels—The Belgian Council of Journalistic Ethics (“Conseil de déontologie journaliste” or CDJ) said last month the daily newspaper Le Soir committed ethical misconduct by failing to properly present promotional content from an official Chinese press agency.

In an opinion published May 20, the CDJ says, “The measures taken by Le Soir to allow the public to perceive without effort an obvious and unquestionable visual distinction between the journalistic content from the redaction and two promotional pages signed by the official press agency Xinhua were insufficient and contravened to article 13 (confusion publicity/information) of the Code of ethics.” The opinion concludes that Le Soir therefore committed ethical misconduct and asks the newspaper to inform its readers about it.

The CDJ adopted the opinion in response to a complaint the International Campaign for Tibet introduced following the newspaper’s publication of two pages produced by Xinhua, an official Chinese news agency, in November 2018

Vincent Metten, the ICT Brussels EU policy director who introduced the complaint on behalf of ICT, said, “The decision of the CDJ is a step in the right direction, and sets a welcome precedent. But our ultimate goal is that Le Soir and all the other newspapers that publish such contents from official Chinese press agencies put a definitive end to this practice; these inserts are indeed tools of propaganda and political influence and threaten the independence of our media.”

Since as early as 2017, ICT has written to Le Soir on several occasions to express its concerns on this matter, but its letters had gone unanswered.

Paid promotional inserts from the official press bodies of the Chinese Communist Party started appearing in the United States in 1992. This practice then spread across Europe, and today, several European newspapers have agreements with the China Daily or Xinhua for the publication of these inserts. These inserts show up in different frequencies and forms, including a multiple-page supplement called China Watch that the China Daily produces. Among those that carry China Daily are not only Le Soir in Belgium, but also Le Figaro and Le Monde in France, El Pais in Spain or the Handelsblatt in Germany (ICT’s requests for clarification to Le Figaro, Le Monde and Handelsblatt have also gone unanswered).

Recently, some newspapers have decided to backtrack and put an end to their cooperation with Chinese state media, including the Süddeutsche Zeitung, the New York Times and more recently the British Daily Telegraph.

According to two Berlin-based research institutes that published a substantive report on growing Chinese influence in Europe, these inserts serve two main objectives: to expose the reader to the official Chinese point

of view by making it appear that the inserts are normal editorial content; and to make the newspapers dependent on China and susceptible to China's leverage on editorial decisions.

Freedom of the press does not exist in China, and some media controlled by the state actively participate in the blackmailing of human rights activists, bloggers, booksellers, editors and journalists to make them "confess" their offenses and to publicly humiliate them. These methods violate the human rights and fundamental freedoms of those they target. They intimidate dissidents and contribute to the repressive climate in China that has only grown under current Chinese Premier Xi Jinping. China Daily and Xinhua, which are state media, are integral parts of this repression.

"It is necessary to think about the limits, criteria and the rules to respect in our democracies regarding communications offered to our media by authoritarian regimes that violate human rights. What is at stake is one of the pillars of our democratic societies: a free and independent press respectful of the democratic values of our countries," Metten added.



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