Media Coverage: Wen Ho Lee, China and Beyond

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【作者注：本文题目或可直译为〈媒体报道：李文和，中国，及其他〉。乃应（美国）英文网刊 Making the Global Local（《让国际变地方》）约稿而作，2000年11月上网（原网址：http://www.hamline.edu/world/currentissue/zhao.html，转载于1A3.CN（中国新闻观察网），http://www.1a3.cn/cnnews/xwlr/200909/6318.html）。文章从评论美国主流媒体在李文和间谍案上的表现入手，提出了美国媒体制度中的一个结构性问题：在国际报道中的意见竞争不平衡。这种不平衡违反了自由主义理论的一个重要前提假设，不公平地损害了外国的利益，同时也损害了美国的长远利益。文章对如何应对这一制度弊病提出了一些初步设想。】
In early 1999, the U.S. media broke the news that China had accelerated its nuclear weapons development by stealing U.S. technology through a Chinese-American scientist. In the following 20 months or so, the story has frequently made the evening news of all major TV networks and the front pages of the most influential newspapers.

All the ingredients seemed to be in place for a sensational espionage story: China fit the role of a fanatic, a bully, a sly and hostile nation with the means of mass destruction. The Chinese government was a communist dictatorship. Wen Ho Lee and other American Chinese were the enemy agents stealing U.S. military secrets. The Energy Department seemed perfect for the role of an incompetent government agency. If you throw in a couple of heroic whistleblowers, some vigilant FBI agents, a few supportive lawmakers and the diligent news media, the story might have been lifted directly from a Hollywood script describing the Cold War that the United States had won ten years earlier.

The Energy Department acted swiftly to revise, if not reverse, its role in the unwritten portion of the script. Determined to play the good guys, the Justice Department jumped in with zest and persistence. The bad guy, Wen Ho Lee, was incarcerated for months without bail. And
he seemed destined to stay behind bars for a long time, at least if public opinion was taken into account.

Alas, the Lee case was not supposed to be a movie. Evidence, or the lack of it, is supposed to count in a court of law—and the prosecution presented no evidence of espionage and little evidence to show any kind of serious law breaking. The case collapsed, with the judge scolding the prosecution for misleading the court and apologizing to Wen Ho Lee on the country's behalf.

In the court of public opinion, the evidence is also supposed to count. Scores of scientists scolded the media. On Sept. 26, after the legal case against Wen Ho Lee had collapsed, an editorial in The New York Times acknowledged the flaws in its reporting. While there was nothing wrong with reporting the allegations against Wen Ho Lee, according to the editors, the Times should have reported as diligently the evidence pointing at his possible innocence. In their defense, the editors argued, the allegations against China and the Chinese government remain undisputed. If Wen Ho Lee did not spy for the Chinese somebody else must have.

The Chinese government and its media had categorically and angrily denied the allegations. But what they say doesn't count in the court of public opinion in the United States. The Chinese may speak and write English, but they don't speak the cultural language of
American-style public debate. They don't have a team of media specialists. They have scarcely heard of the polls, the focus groups, and the letter-writing campaigns that are staples of American politics and public relations. They don't even have the budget to monitor what's said about them in the U.S. media.

Chinese officials not only don't respond in a timely fashion to allegations, they often don't even return phone calls from the media asking for comments or interviews. And when they are interviewed, their accents, mannerisms and choices of words are more likely to hurt their cause than help it. Many Chinese—officials, intellectuals and students—have a profound conviction that the Western media, especially the U.S. media, are controlled by the forces hostile to China. The Western media, it's widely believed, are determined to demonize China. The U.S. game of public opinion is fixed, many Chinese believe, and playing the game only makes China look worse.

Some U.S. journalists are insulted by such allegations, while others laugh them off. The game is fair, most American journalists believe. In fact, they say, being fair and detached is our guiding principle. But, they hasten to add, we as the media are only responsible for keeping the score. If you as a player refuse to play or don't know how to play, you can't blame the scorekeeper if you lose. We guarantee a fair process; you players and "the truth" determine the outcome.
Such exchanges, using a Chinese proverb, are like a chicken speaking to a duck - they don't communicate. If the process is fair, many Chinese wonder, why does the outcome always seem like a foregone conclusion? Some Taiwanese and Indonesian merchants took money from several Chinese individuals to buy photo opportunities with U.S. politicians at fund-raising functions, so that the Chinese could hang the photos at home. Somehow the American public was led to believe that China as whole attempted to corrupt American political system.

The U.S. Air Force bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists and wounding others. But the American media created the impression that the Chinese government was brainwashing its citizens into believing that the bombing was intentional rather than accidental. For Chinese critics of the U.S. media, this case seems to reveal the hypocrisy underlying arguments made on behalf of the U.S. media system. How fair, detached or independent were the media when they unquestioningly accepted U.S. government's "accident" claim and further assumed that everyone else should do the same—that any Chinese skepticism was just a pretense for inciting anti-American sentiment? Based on that same assumption, there was more coverage of angry Chinese throwing stones at the American embassy in Beijing than the ruins of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade after the U.S. bombing.
Then came Wen Ho Lee. He was the only person accused of stealing nuclear technology for China. He was exonerated in a court of law. China, however, was still convicted of spying, without a spy, in the court of media and public opinion.

To many Chinese, some of whom are extremely critical of the Chinese government, the above seem to be convincing evidences that the American news media, as an instrument of U.S. policy, are intent on dividing and destroying China, culturally and even militarily. To defend China, they urge a military buildup. For some U.S. politicians, however, that would only be further evidence of a threat from China.

These miscommunications between the two media systems and the two peoples are profound, far-reaching and potentially dangerous. The faults are not with any individual journalists or any media organizations. Within the American system and measured against American standards, most U.S. journalists I've observed are conscientious, responsible and often courageous, doing the best they know how to be fair, truthful and thorough. The problem is in the system and the standards.

The ethical standard of American media professionals is heavily influenced by John Milton's philosophy of the free market of ideas. Let all sides fight it out in the court of public opinion while the media keep score; whichever wins is assumed to be the most truthful,
appropriate or simply the best. It's not that different from a court of law, where the prosecution and the defense fight to win the approval of the jury while the judge keeps score. To the extent that the process is fair, the outcome is assumed to be just.

This ethical system is supplemented in practice by a system of commercial accountability. If a news organization fails in its duty or crosses a generally accepted boundary, the mistreated party may protest, the media critics may cry foul, and the media outlet may lose its credibility, its audience, and eventually its advertising revenue. The influenced has a way of influencing the influential. It is an elegant design, even though the machine does not always operate precisely as designed.

The entire design, however, was set within the U.S. borders. It was meant to be various American interests fighting in the free market of American public opinion, with the American media monitoring American policies, serving the American audience, under the scrutiny of American critics, and being accountable to the American public. When this system was conceived, America's current dominance in the world was not quite anticipated, nor was the influence of the rest of the world on the United States. So it was never asked whether it was fair to other nations—or even whether it was good for the United States—that other nations were not equal players in the American media game, even when they are the subject.
Maybe this is the time to ask those questions.

In a court of law, public defenders represent those accused who cannot afford a lawyer. These lawyers are paid from tax revenues because they serve the interests of the public. They make an otherwise lopsided game fairer. They give a vital integrity and credibility to the legal system. Without them, not only the accused might lose, but also the truth, and ultimately the society as a whole.

In the court of public opinion, there currently is no similar system of defense for the accused or the ignored, especially when they are other nations. While prosecution without defense isn't allowed in the legal game, it is a common occurrence in the media game. The adverse impact is not just on the accused or the ignored foreign nations, but also on the truth, the integrity and credibility of the media system, the appropriateness of American policy, the American image abroad, and ultimately the interests of the American people.

The practical system of accountability also breaks down once the American media exerts its impact beyond U.S. borders. The U.S. media don't feel as obliged or compelled to respond to the outcry or outrage of foreign nations as they would to the protests of parties within the United States. The influenced is unable to influence the influential when the influenced is a foreign nation and the influential is the American media. After all we are the American media,
the media professionals would say, refusing to acknowledge their responsibility toward the other peoples whose lives they affect. It is a power without accountability, like a 17-year old with the muscle of a champion wrestler but the mentality of a mischievous schoolboy refusing to behave like an adult. He often gets somebody hurt and may eventually get hurt himself.

It might help to reconsider the code of journalistic ethics, acknowledging the U.S. media's increasing influence over the world and the responsibility that comes with that influence.

It also might help to consider an organization of international advocates responsible for defending nations accused in the American media and speaking up for those that are unduly ignored—especially those that are, for economic, ideological, cultural or whatever other reasons, unable or unwilling to defend or advocate themselves. Even a devil's advocate makes a better debate. A more balanced story is not only a more informative story but also a more interesting and more entertaining story. The American news media themselves might fund such an organization. Funding also could come from other U.S. companies that have profited from business abroad, as well as from other nations, which stand to benefit directly from such an endeavor.
As a former journalist in China, I know that substantial change is needed in China's media system too. But that is for another article, in another language, through another channel of communication.