

China Allows Media to Report on Air Pollution Crisis



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Cyclists traveled on the road in Huaibei, Anhui Province, on Monday.

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BEIJING — The Chinese state news media on Monday published aggressive reports on what they described as the sickening and dangerous air pollution in Beijing and other parts of northern [China](#), indicating that popular anger over air quality had reached a level where Communist Party propaganda officials felt that they had to allow the officially sanctioned press to address the growing concerns of ordinary citizens.

The across-the-board coverage of Beijing's brown, soupy air, which has been consistently [rated "hazardous" or even worse](#) by foreign and local monitors since last week, was the most open in recent memory. Since 2008, when Beijing made efforts to clean up the city before the Summer Olympics, the air has appeared to degrade in the view of many residents, though the official news media have often avoided addressing the problem.

The wide coverage on Monday appears to be in part a reaction to the conversation that has been unfolding on Chinese microblogs, where residents of northern China have been discussing the pollution nonstop in recent days.

The problem is so serious — the worst air quality since the United States Embassy began recording levels in 2008 — that hospitals reported on Monday a surge in patient admissions for respiratory problems, and Beijing officials ordered government cars off the road to try to curb the pollution, which some people say has been exacerbated by a weather phenomenon, called an inversion, that is trapping dirty particles.

“I’ve never seen such broad Chinese media coverage of air pollution,” said Jeremy Goldkorn, a business consultant in Beijing who tracks the Chinese news media. “From People’s Daily to China Central Television, the story is being covered thoroughly, without trying to put a positive spin on it.”

People’s Daily, the official party mouthpiece, published a front-page signed editorial on Monday under the headline “Beautiful China Starts With Healthy Breathing.” “The seemingly never-ending haze and fog may blur our vision,” it said, “but makes us see extra clearly the urgency of pollution control and the urgency of the theory of building a socialist ecological civilization, revealed at the 18th Party Congress.”

The 18th Party Congress, a meeting of party elites held in Beijing last November, was part of a once-a-decade leadership transition. In a political report delivered on the first day, Hu Jintao, the president and departing party chief, said China must address environmental problems worsened by rapid development. The inclusion of sections in the report on the need for “ecological progress” could be opening the door for greater dialogue on such issues under the watch of [Xi Jinping](#), the new party chief, and his colleagues on the Politburo Standing Committee.

Even before the congress, the official news media had some latitude to publish critiques of environmental policy and investigate environmental degradation, in contrast to strict limits on what they can say on “core interest” issues like Tibet and Taiwan. Nevertheless, the coverage unfolding now represents a new level of depth in addressing air pollution.

Bill Bishop, the editor of Sinocism, a daily online newsletter about news media coverage of China, [wrote on Monday](#) that “Chinese media is all over the story in a remarkably transparent contrast to today’s haze in Beijing.”

Mr. Bishop wrote: “Clearly it is impossible to pretend that the air is not polluted or that the health risks are not significant, so are the propaganda authorities just recognizing reality in allowing coverage? Or is there something more going on here, as perhaps the new government wants to both demonstrate a commitment to transparency and accountability as well as use this crisis to further the difficult reforms toward a more sustainable development model?”

China Youth Daily, a state-run newspaper, published a scathing signed commentary on Monday under the headline “Lack of Responsive Actions More Choking Than the Haze and Fog.” The commentary questioned basic economic policies and the China growth model: “This choking, dirty and poisonous air forces the Chinese to rethink the widespread, messy development model.”

Global Times, a newspaper that often defends the party, [said in an editorial](#) that the government in the past had erred by releasing pollution information in a “low-key way.” It said: “In the future, the government should publish truthful environmental data to the public. Let society participate in the process of solving the problem.”

On Saturday, when a [Twitter feed](#) from the United States Embassy rated the air in central Beijing an astounding 755 on an air quality scale of 0 to 500, China Central Television, the main state network, devoted a big part of its 7 p.m. newscast to the pollution. That night, the Beijing government reported alarming levels of a potentially deadly particulate matter called PM 2.5; in some districts, it exceeded 900 micrograms per cubic meter, on par with some of the worst days of the [killer smog in London](#) in the mid-20th century.

Under pressure from the existence of the embassy monitor and growing anger among prominent Chinese Internet users, Chinese officials have been releasing more data on PM 2.5 levels, in a sign of creeping transparency. Beijing began reporting PM 2.5 levels in January 2012. Xinhua, the state-run news agency, [announced late last year](#) that the Ministry of Environmental Protection had required 74 cities to start releasing PM 2.5 data. For years, Chinese officials had been trying to limit public information to data on PM 10 or other pollutants that are generally considered less deadly than PM 2.5, which is invisible and can lodge deep in the lungs.

“Last year, Chinese media began to report with regularity on air pollution, especially in Beijing and concerning PM 2.5 in particular,” Mr. Goldkorn said. “But the apocalyptic skies above the capital this last weekend seemed to have encouraged an even greater enthusiasm for reporting this story.”

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