

CRM RESEARCH REPORT / CRM-RP-2026-011

Freedom of Expression, Media and Association: Information Control, Detention of Journalists and Civic Space in China, 2016–2026

Analysing national security, platform governance, media control, Hong Kong legal change, the White Paper protests and associational space.

INSTITUTION	EVIDENCE CUT-OFF	VERSION
China Rights Monitor	28 July 2026	1.0 / Institutional

DOCUMENTING TRUTH. DEFENDING RIGHTS.

Executive summary

International standards, Chinese law and policy, journalist and association cases, platform rules, censorship research and public records.

This institutional report covers the period from 2016 to 2026, with China as its principal jurisdictional focus. It is prepared for courts, law firms, protection decision-makers, international organisations and specialist human-rights bodies. It separates allegations, verified facts, institutional findings and CRM analysis, and it does not substitute institutional reputation for source-level scrutiny.

Research design and evidence hierarchy

CRM conducted a structured desk review of UN treaty-body and special-procedure material, legislation, judgments, government and parliamentary records, enforcement documents, research with a disclosed methodology, and reputable reporting used for chronology. Each proposition was assessed for provenance, date, jurisdiction, procedural stage, corroboration, contrary material and limitations. Primary law and original official records receive the highest presumptive weight, but relevance and currency remain necessary.

China-focused analytical framework

The analysis begins with formal legal authority and institutional competence, then tests observable implementation, practical access to safeguards and the availability of effective remedy. National-security exceptions, administrative discretion, Party-state coordination, professional regulation and digital governance are considered separately. General country evidence is not treated as an automatic finding about an individual case.

Principal findings

- 01** Freedom of expression protects speech that disturbs, offends government or challenges orthodoxy; restrictions require clear law, necessity and proportionality.
- 02** China's information governance combines offences, licensing, real-name systems, platform liability, surveillance and content removal and cannot be reduced to the Great Firewall.
- 03** National-security, public-order, subversion, secrecy and business offences perform different functions in cases involving journalists, bloggers and publishers.
- 04** Hong Kong's 2020 National Security Law and 2024 Safeguarding National Security Ordinance altered risk for media, organisations, trials and extraterritorial speech.
- 05** Association is shaped by registration, foreign funding, supervisory bodies, charity and security law; formal dissolution is only one form of closure.
- 06** Protection and court cases must connect content, reach, account attribution, state attention, deletion records and subsequent police action.

Institutional mechanisms and risk indicators

- 01** Criminalisation through security, public order, secrecy and reputation rules.
- 02** Platform censorship through keywords, account bans, downranking, real-name rules, retention and data disclosure.
- 03** Press cards, editorial responsibility, ownership and Party structures shape the media environment.
- 04** Unlicensed reporting on crises, protest, labour and corruption carries heightened risk.

05 Registration, foreign-NGO law, donations, banking and premises affect organisational survival.

06 Hong Kong warrants, bounties, asset and organisational measures chill overseas speech.

Selected cases and documentary record

01 Shanghai

02 Zhang Zhan

03 Convicted for Wuhan reporting, detained again after release and sentenced to another four years in 2025.

04 Shanghai

05 Chen Pinlin

06 Sentenced to three and a half years after a White Paper protest documentary; proceedings were closed.

07 Hong Kong

08 Media and democratic organisations

09 Media closures, organisational dissolution, asset measures and prosecutions changed civic space after the NSL.

10 Multiple Chinese cities

11 White Paper protesters

12 Participants faced questioning, detention, account and travel pressure; public coverage remains incomplete.

13 National online platforms

14 Bloggers, citizen journalists and account operators

15 Account deletion and suspension coexist with prosecutions; platform and administrative steps often precede criminal process.

16 News and publishing

17 Professional journalists and publishers

18 RSF consistently lists China among the largest jailers of media workers; totals vary by definition and cut-off.

Professional evidential use

01 Preserve original posts, URLs, timestamps, account ownership, reach, deletion notices and subsequent police action.

02 Journalist detention totals should state definition, Hong Kong coverage, cut-off and case status.

03 Court analysis should separate content, reach, state response and individual risk.

04 Association cases should verify legal entity, registration, funding, leadership, activity and dissolution or sanction records.

05 Grade digital evidence by originality, integrity, metadata, preservation and reproducibility.

Forensic use requires a transparent bridge between general country material and the individual facts. A source schedule should identify the exact proposition supported, original-language title, issuing body, date, paragraph or page, stable URL, access date, source tier and any qualification. Authentication difficulties created by secrecy or fear of retaliation must be addressed expressly rather than converted automatically into an adverse inference.

Recommendations and accountability pathways

Limitations and update protocol

Research on China is constrained by censorship, inaccessible proceedings, risk to interviewees, uneven regional coverage, translation and the inability to inspect some sites or classified records. Quantitative totals differ by definition and cut-off. CRM records these limitations, avoids unsupported extrapolation and will issue a revised version when a correction materially affects a finding.

Conclusion

Professional reliability depends on verifiable references, a disclosed method, clear distinctions between types of evidence and conclusions proportionate to the record. The report should be read with its cited primary material and updated for the procedural date of any case in which it is relied upon.

Principal references

Tier I · ICCPR Article 19 and Human Rights Committee General Comment 34

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression/international-standards>

Tier II · CECC 2025 Annual Report

<https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2025-annual-report>

Tier III · RSF China country profile and Press Freedom Index

<https://rsf.org/en/country/china>

Tier III · RSF: Zhang Zhan sentenced again

<https://rsf.org/en/nouvelle-peine-de-prison-pour-zhang-zhan-symbole-de-la-r%C3%A9pression-continue-de-la-libert%C3%A9-de-la>

Tier I · Hong Kong Safeguarding National Security Ordinance

<https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/A305>

Tier I · OHCHR: freedom of peaceful assembly and association standards

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-assembly-and-association/international-standards>

Suggested citation

CHINA RIGHTS MONITOR, *Freedom of Expression, Media and Association: Information Control, Detention of Journalists and Civic Space in China, 2016–2026*, CRM-RP-2026-011, version 1.0 (28 July 2026).