

The reports this week from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg about concerted attacks by Chinese hackers on their computer systems in the wake of unflattering coverage of Chinese leaders and other stories from China should be a cause for concern to everyone, but especially for people, businesses and the government in Taiwan.

A single click on a Web page link or an e-mail can often have unwanted results, as many computer users know, leading to the downloading of a virus, triggering spam or leading to identity theft. Concerted efforts by hackers, such as denial of service attacks, can temporarily cripple a company.

However, the apparent effort to monitor US media outlets, their journalists and possible contacts should serve as a reminder of the insidiousness and aggressiveness of Beijing's efforts to control information, manipulate its image and fight every effort to make its actions more transparent.

The attack on Bloomberg came after it published a story in June last year about the wealth of relatives of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping (习近平). The four-month-long attack on the Times followed a story by its Shanghai bureau chief, David Barboza, about the business activities and wealth of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's (温家宝) relatives.

According to the Times, Mandiant, a US computer security company, said in December that it had found evidence that Chinese hackers had stolen e-mails, contacts and files from more than 30 journalists and executives at Western news organizations, and some journalists were the subject of repeat attacks. Investigating the attacks on the Times, the company's experts said the attacks started from the same university computers used by the Chinese military to attack US military contractors in the past.

This is not the first time Western journalists have been targets. In January 2010, several reporters in Beijing said their Gmail accounts had been hacked and their e-mails had been forwarded to other accounts. In March 2010, reporters and human rights activists in China and Taiwan reported their Yahoo e-mail accounts had been tampered with.

China's assault on press freedom

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China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense rebuffed the allegations of Chinese involvement in the attacks on the Times or other companies. Foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei (洪磊) said "Chinese laws clearly forbid hacking attacks, and we hope relevant parties take a responsible attitude on this issue."

It is hard not to take such protestations cynically, given that Hong and other official spokespeople frequently deny that there is any press censorship in China or that human rights abuses take place. Such denials carry no weight.

China has long sought to gag critics within the country, through arrests, torture, imprisonment and "labor reform," and to restrict its people's access to the outside world. It has not had complete success, thanks to the bravery of so many Chinese who have been willing to risk everything to speak their minds, and to technological advances such as personal computers, the Internet and cellphones.

The growing attacks from China on the world's free press should not be tolerated, nor should Beijing's insulting denials of accountability.

China, of course, is not the only country from which cyberattacks are launched, but it is one of the worst offenders. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says a global effort is needed to establish "rules of the road" for cyberactivity. Taiwan should be in the forefront of such an effort.

Taiwanese have fought long and hard for political and media freedoms at home. The fight now needs to be carried out on a broader battleground, notwithstanding the government's drive for closer ties with China. Beijing should be sent a very clear message that such snooping will not be tolerated and will have a price.

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