

TV network says it's been shut down in China

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The only uncensored Chinese-language TV network broadcasting in China says its satellite company has shut down its signal because of pressure from the Chinese government.

The satellite company, Paris-based Eutelsat, says the signal to China was cut because of a technical problem. But New Tang Dynasty Television, an independent station with offices in 70 U.S. cities, including Palo Alto, says Eutelsat cut its signal at the request of government officials in China.

NTDTV covers a number of human rights issues, including the Falun Gong spiritual movement, repression in Tibet and China's underground Christian movement. In China, news is controlled by the government's Central Propaganda Department, and the government is notoriously unfriendly to outside media.

"We are the only (Chinese) channel not under the state's control," said Cathy Zhang, general manager of the Palo Alto office of the nonprofit station. The station estimates it has 225 million potential viewers worldwide, including 100 million in Asia. "Our coverage is controversial from the communist regime's point of view.

"We just want to bring the truth to the Chinese people. They get a filtered view from the government."

Station officials are asking members of Congress to appeal on their behalf to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the federal agency responsible for international broadcasting.

With the Olympic Games starting in Beijing in a few weeks, NTDTV is desperate to get the China satellite back and has enlisted the help of groups that promote freedom of expression.

Reporters Without Borders, an organization that advocates for freedom of the press worldwide, says it has proof that the shutdown of the station's signal was politically motivated.

Undercover inquiry

At a news conference July 11 in New York, the group released a transcript of a recorded telephone conversation with a Eutelsat employee in Beijing. A person working with a human rights organization, which Reporters Without Borders declined to name, pretended to be an official with the Central Propaganda Department and talked to the Eutelsat employee June 23 in an attempt to get information about the reason for the shutdown.

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"It was our company's CEO in France who decided to stop NTDTV's signal," the Eutelsat employee allegedly said. "We could have turned off any of the transponders. It was because we got repeated complaints and reminders from the Chinese government. Two years ago, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television kept saying the same thing over and over: 'Stop that TV station before we begin to talk.' "

According to the transcript, the Eutelsat employee said the company was trying to please the Chinese government to win more business contracts.

Reached in Paris, Eutelsat Communications Director Vanessa O'Connor called the shutdown a "technical anomaly" that could not be avoided.

Eutelsat is looking into it

"Eutelsat has no authority to exercise any control over the content released by clients on our satellite," O'Connor said.

She said the station was not the only service affected; Euronews and C Music TV, two stations that also broadcast in China, were switched off. She said the company investigated the shutdown and concluded that nothing could be done to fix it.

As for the recorded phone conversation with the Eutelsat employee in Beijing, she said the company is looking into it.

"Whether or not it took place, the overriding position of Eutelsat is that we have no authority to interfere with content."

Tala Dowlatshahi, the New York representative of Reporters Without Borders, said her organization went through steps to ensure the validity of the conversation with the Eutelsat employee before holding its press conference.

"There has been a great deal of pressure from the Chinese government to limit information and to repress news agencies that air anything deemed to threaten their interests," Dowlatshahi said. "The conversation proves it."

NTDTV, which began broadcasting in 2002, has had previous problems with its broadcasts to China. In 2005, Eutelsat refused to renew its contract, but after media reports and demonstrations, the company had a change of heart.

"They had to give up their plan and renew with us," Zhang said.

The station, which continues to air in the United States, Europe and Australia, has done stories on the anniversary of the June 4 student movement; Majora Carter, the torch bearer who carried the Tibetan flag; and a declaration by Santa Clara County designating August as Human Rights Month for Chinese People. Station officials say these are welcome stories for people in China who have limited access to TV, the Internet and newspapers.

"Our station is built to benefit Chinese people and be the true voice of the community," said Ying Yang, a project manager for the station. "We do objective and neutral reporting on human rights and culture issues of Chinese and other ethnic groups."

Censorship in china

In China, you can't just read the New York Times or other newspapers on the Internet, Zhang said. Google is filtered. If you type in the word Tibet, you see only the government's point of view of the uprising. All press releases come from the Central Propaganda Department.

"The first thing you learn in journalism school is that the media is the mouthpiece for the party," Zhang said. "It said that on the first page of my newswriting book."

The station had hoped to cover the Olympics in Beijing but was denied press credentials.

"There's so much happening," Yang said. "They promised they would improve human rights before the Olympics, but they just limited traffic and shut down factories to improve the air quality.

"People's lives are being affected. It needs to be covered."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/07/26/MNLM11TRVM.DTL>

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