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From Suppression to Management: Desensitizing Popular Unrest in the Chinese Media

In 2008, facing burgeoning online discourse, the Chinese propaganda authority abandoned its long-standing strategy of suppressing all information on incidents of popular protest. The recent policy adjustment seems to be part of a more proactive media policy, which seeks to regain control by permitting and managing media reporting on 'sensitive' events.

This paper examines two streams of public discourse. First, it analyzes Chinese media reports on three major cases of social unrest occurred in 2008 and 2009. Second, it examines the evolution of debate on 'mass-incidents' and 'stability' in this period. The study argues that the lifting of the reporting ban provided an opportunity for discursive entrepreneurs to push the boundaries of what can be said about popular contention and challenge the government-defined meaning of 'stability.' The paper finally explores how the shift in discourse may affect the government's practice of managing social unrest.