

Bloomberg News Buried Stories Critical of China

Bloomberg News silenced reporters and killed an investigation six years ago into the wealth of Communist Party elites in China because they were afraid of the Chinese government. In their quest to appease Chinese party officials, Bloomberg forced reporters to sign non-disclosure agreements or face financial devastation – and even bullied and attempted to muzzle the wife of one of the reporters until she hired Edward Snowden’s lawyers.

“My story shows the lengths that the Bloomberg machine will go to in order to avoid offending Beijing,” journalist Leta Hong Fincher [writes](#) at *The Intercept*. “Bloomberg’s company, Bloomberg LP, is so dependent on the vast China market for its business that its lawyers threatened to devastate my family financially if I didn’t sign an NDA silencing me about how Bloomberg News killed a story critical of Chinese Communist Party leaders. It was only when I hired Edward Snowden’s lawyers in Hong Kong that Bloomberg LP eventually called off their hounds after many attempts to intimidate me.”

“They assumed that because I was the wife of their employee, I was the wife,” Fincher tells NPR. “I was just an appendage of their employee. I was not a human being.”

Fincher is married to journalist Mike Forsythe, the lead writer on a Bloomberg team that penned an [award-winning investigation](#) into the accumulation of wealth by Chinese President Xi Jinping, part of a “Revolution to Riches” series on Chinese leaders.

Despite a warning from the Chinese ambassador, Bloomberg News published that first story. He began receiving death threats.

“Soon after Bloomberg published the article on Xi’s family

wealth in June 2012, my husband received death threats conveyed by a woman who told him she represented a relative of Xi," writes Fincher. "The woman conveying the threats specifically mentioned the danger to our whole family; our two children were 6 and 8 years old at the time.

The New Yorker's Evan Osnos reports a similar encounter in his award-winning book, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China*, when the same woman told Osnos's wife: 'He [Forsythe] and his family can't stay in China. It's no longer safe,' she said. 'Something will happen. It will look like an accident. Nobody will know what happened. He'll just be found dead.'"

That threat was all the more real given that British businessman Neil Heywood had been poisoned just months earlier by the wife of a senior Chinese leader, Bo Xilai, according to Chinese state media.

Bloomberg News wanted the family to stay quiet about the death threats. Fincher didn't, and the family ultimately had to relocate to Hong Kong.

Despite the obvious dangers, the reporting team continued working on the next installment of the story throughout 2013, focusing on Chinese leaders' ties to Wang Jianlin, the country's richest man. The story itemized the links between top Chinese Communist Party officials and the country's wealthiest man. Senior news editors in New York City expressed excitement about the story, NPR reports. But then there was radio silence, and the story never ran.

"Mike and some of the other reporters and editors who had been working on this story just were asking for answers about ... why was this story killed?" Fincher says.

"It is for sure going to, you know, invite the Communist Party to, you know, completely shut us down and kick us out of the country," said editor-in-chief Matthew Winkler on a conference

call which NPR obtained audio from. "So, I just don't see that as a story that is justified."

"The inference is going to be interpreted by the government there as we are judging them," Winkler said. "And they will probably kick us out of the country. They'll probably shut us down, is my guess."

Winkler then suggested reporters should find a "Bloomberg" way to cover the story without running "afoul of the Nazis who are in front of us and behind us everywhere. And that's who they are. And we should have no illusions about it."

Publicly, Bloomberg said the story didn't run because it "needed additional reporting." But the audio recordings obtained by NPR reveal just how much Bloomberg editors were worried about losing lucrative business in China.

"There's a way to use the information you have in such a way that enables us to report, but not kill ourselves in the process and wipe out everything we've tried to build there," Winkler told the reporting team.

That wasn't really true, however. After the first story ran in 2012, Chinese authorities searched Bloomberg's news bureaus and delayed visas for reporters. They also directed state-owned companies not to sign new leases for Bloomberg's primary product: its terminals. Subscribers pay \$20,000 annually for a terminal which provides news analysis and financial data. These terminals are how Mike Bloomberg made his money – currently [estimated at more than \\$50 billion](#).

At the time, Mike Bloomberg was the mayor of New York City, and publicly, he denied that he had control of the company or that it was intimidated by China.

"Nobody thinks we are wusses and not willing to stand up and write stories that are of interest to the public and that are factually correct," Bloomberg said at a City Hall press

conference.

Meanwhile Bloomberg News suspended Forsythe, saying he had leaked the controversy to other media. After Bloomberg fired him, he went to work at *The New York Times*.

NPR [reports](#):

Forsythe declined to comment for this story. In leaving the company, he signed a nondisclosure agreement that bars him from speaking publicly about his time at Bloomberg News. Others from the China investigative team would leave the company in the years that followed, each having first signed an agreement not to disparage the company. In at least one case, a journalist signed the nondisparagement deal in part to prevent the loss of a month's pay.

Lawyers for Bloomberg News pressured someone else to sign a nondisclosure agreement: Forsythe's wife, Fincher.

They threatened to force Forsythe and Fincher to pay back the tens of thousands of dollars spent to move their family to Hong Kong after the death threats. Bloomberg also threatened to sue to make the couple pay the company's legal costs, pushing the dollar amount well into the six figures.

"There was no reason why I should have to sign a nondisclosure agreement," Fincher tells NPR, "because I didn't possess any damaging material about the company."

"They assumed that my husband would be able to silence me," Fincher says. "He didn't want to do that. That's not the kind of relationship that we have."

"I told my husband's lawyer that I did not want to sign a gag order, so Bloomberg summoned me and my husband to a meeting on December 16 at Mayer Brown JSM's office in central Hong Kong," writes Fincher. "We sat around a fancy conference table with

some Bloomberg senior editors and Mayer Brown lawyers and spoke via videoconference with a lawyer from Willkie, Farr & Gallagher, representing Bloomberg in New York. My husband's lawyer said that I did not possess any recordings or emails that might be damaging evidence about the company's practices."

"But what about all the evidence that is in her head?" said the man on the video screen. Fincher chose to walk out of the conference room, leave the building and never return. But Bloomberg LP attorneys continued to harass and threaten her until she hired the elite Hong Kong attorneys that represented American whistleblower Edward Snowden, Albert Ho and Jonathan Man.

Ho, a Hong Kong pro-democracy legislator and activist, told Fincher that if Bloomberg didn't back down, they would hold a press conference to shame them. It was only then that Bloomberg LP backed off.

Bloomberg's decision to bury news stories that anger Communist party officials in order to keep the profitable Chinese market may someday be seen in the same light as Hollywood executives that [suppressed criticism of Nazism in order to sell movies in Germany](#).

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