

## China Politics &amp; Policy

## Sage is latest publisher to warn of China censorship pressures

Beijing intensifies efforts against foreign-produced content



A bookshop in Handan in China's northern Hebei province. Beijing is seeking to control the availability of content from foreign publications © AFP NOVEMBER 21, 2017 Ben Bland in Hong Kong

Another leading academic publisher has been warned that it may have to censor in China or be forced out of the market, as Beijing intensifies its control over [foreign education](#) and publishing.

Sage Publishing, a US-based company that produces more than 1,000 academic journals, said it had not yet received a formal request to “remove or block access to certain documents or content within China”.

But it said that “we have however, as have other publishers, been warned that there is a risk that this may happen”.

China has [extended](#) its censorship campaign to foreign publishers this year, as part of President Xi Jinping’s wider crackdown on dissent and criticism. Before Sage, only three other global academic publishers have [admitted](#) to facing pressure from Beijing’s censors.

The International Publishers’ Association, a global trade body, said that China was putting the industry in an “impossible situation” where publishers must [compromise](#) their commitment to free speech or risk losing access to one of the world’s biggest markets.

The climate of fear is spreading beyond China, with Allen & Unwin, a prominent Australian publisher, recently [dropping](#) a book about rising Chinese influence in Australia because of concerns about possible reprisals from Beijing.

Christopher Balding, a professor at Peking University HSBC Business School in Shenzhen, urged publishers to resist Beijing’s tactics of picking them off one-by-one.

“It’s clearly part of a much broader strategy to push Chinese norms and its censorship regime outside the country,” he said. “But if publishers have a common position, China won’t be able to block them all.”

A person familiar with the situation at Sage, which is run by American businesswoman Sara Miller McCune, said that the warning came from people working for its importing partner in China. Foreign publishers that sell content in China are required to work with a state-owned importer, which is responsible for censoring content.

Sage produces a wide range of publications including the journal of Index on Censorship, a free speech campaign group in London, and collections of historic documents, including the China files of the UK Foreign Office.

Another person familiar with the situation said that Sage’s Chinese partner had asked whether it would be possible to remove certain documents from these collections within China, in line with wider efforts by Beijing to [eradicate](#) historical material that challenges the Communist party’s narrative.

Sage said that as a general principle it “does not block or remove content” in response to censorship requests but that it is possible that “Chinese importers or authorities could themselves block access to content”.

“In that case, our preference would be that the entire product is withdrawn as far as that is possible in order to preserve its intellectual integrity,” it said. “However, in all cases we would first consult with the content owner, society or journal editor as appropriate to ascertain their preferences in the situation.”

Jodie Ginsberg, chief executive of Index on Censorship, called on publishers to uphold their “special responsibility to freedom of expression”.

“We would be dismayed if our publisher started censoring academic material in China and we would have to consider whether Sage Publishing remained our publisher or not,” she said.

The Financial Times revealed last month that Springer Nature, the German group that publishes Scientific American, had removed content in China that was deemed politically sensitive by the Communist party.

Cambridge University Press said in August that it had [acceded](#) to a similar request from the Chinese authorities, before reversing course following an [outcry](#) from academics. RELX Group, another academic publisher, removed its media cuttings service from the Chinese market in March after being asked to remove some content.

Michiel Kolman, the president of the International Publishers’ Association and an executive at RELX, hit out at China earlier this month, telling Publishing Perspectives, a trade magazine, that Beijing had put publishing houses in an “impossible position” where they are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t”.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved.