

# THIS WEEK

## EDITORIALS

**TURKEY** A worrying crackdown on freedom of speech **p.414**

**WORLD VIEW** Mark out self-retractions as badges of honour **p.415**



**EYE, EYE** Night vision improved with help from unusual fish **p.417**

## Cultural conundrum

*The Chinese government's professed commitment to transparency and responsiveness has had a rocky start. That bodes ill for the desire to attract the best science brains from around the world.*

**T**he Chinese government is open and accountable. Says who? Says the Chinese government. In mid-February, the state council, the nation's highest administrative authority, released a statement saying that government affairs should be "transparent to, understood by, and responsive to the public".

Ten days later, it announced a new social-media app to allow interaction with the government and distribute information about government services, boasting the slogan "the government is right by your side".

And earlier this month, premier Li Keqiang told all ministers that they would have to make themselves available to the press. Sure enough, at the end of the annual meetings of the People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPCC), a couple of dozen ministers appeared in the Chinese media to discuss the meetings' proceedings and the future of the country.

But China's version of transparency is very one-sided. Information flows freely in one direction, and it is not towards the people. For Chinese people even to ask questions of the government remains a no-no.

President Xi Jinping made this clear during a tour of China's three most prominent state-owned media outlets, when he encouraged journalists to toe the party line. His message was clear: the media are a propaganda tool of the state rather than an outlet for public discussion.

'Don't ask, we will tell', has also been the government's approach to its environmental problems. Although the government often laments its air and water pollution problems in the state media, it does not appreciate being questioned about how well it is dealing with them. Last year, it quickly blocked *Under the Dome*, a video documentary by journalist Chai Jing detailing the problem, which had gone viral.

The freedom to question is a hot topic in China right now. Last week, amid the government's latest responsiveness and transparency campaign, a journalist for the *Science and Technology Daily* asked a CPCC member an innocuous question on a topic discussed in the previous day's government meeting. Officials had mentioned that some industries that served the military had major down time between military projects, causing gaps in productivity. The journalist wanted to know what might be done to help these industries, and whether lessons from other countries might offer any clues. The CPCC member berated the journalist in front of the whole forum: "I'd like to point out that some media, for example, you, the one from *S&T Daily*, dwell on some negative issues," he said. "I've already noted down your licence number, so be careful, or you'll have to answer to the authorities." The journalist said that there must have been a misunderstanding and offered to discuss the matter later. The bureaucrat refused: "I don't have an obligation to talk with you," he said.

One of China's major goals is social harmony, and it remains an open question whether a democratic or an autocratic form of government is best able to achieve that. The Chinese state media have been quick to point to the current US presidential race as a clear sign of the

'malfunction' of democracy, because people 'vote to vent', not to choose a good leader. But China holds tightly to another goal as well — scientific development and innovation — for which free questioning and open debate are essential. Restricting the ability to ask questions does not work for that. It doesn't work for keeping scientific experiments on

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course, or for making sure that publications are as good as they can be. It doesn't work for confirming the details of a potential scientific collaboration, or for ensuring that grant committees select the most promising projects. It doesn't work for nailing down the details of material-transfer agreements, or for picking the best science-policy objectives. And it

won't help China's ongoing efforts to lure the best brains from around the world. From the fear of increasingly strict regulations on what can be said to the ban on the use of tools such as Google and Google Scholar, which many scientists consider essential for information gathering, the country is making itself a much less attractive destination.

If China is to meet its scientific objectives (see page 424), a culture of debate and transparency is essential. No scientific community does this perfectly, but, in a country that discourages questions, the will to investigate and fully understand cannot be expected to take root. ■

## Siren call

*Now that gravitational waves have been discovered, it is time to put them to use.*

**T**he Universe is big, and getting bigger all the time. A little-known fact about gravitational waves, the latest cosmological discovery to get physicists excited (see page 428) is that they could help to measure this expansion. And they could show why the expansion has been accelerating, rather than slowing down as expected, under the push of a mysterious force dubbed dark energy.

The way in which astronomers conventionally measure distances has ancient roots. With ingenuity and a dash of basic trigonometry, the ancient Greek astronomer Aristarchus of Samos was able to measure the Moon's distance from Earth with surprising accuracy — in the third century BC.

A similar method to Aristarchus', using a concept known as stellar parallax, was first applied to measure a star's distance from Earth in 1838, and is still used today. The European Space Agency's Gaia probe is currently using it to compile a state-of-the-art catalogue of one billion stars in the Milky Way, extending the reach of parallax to unprecedented