

On June 11, 2009, the World Health Organization declared a level 6 swine flu pandemic, the first time since the Hong Kong flu in 1968 killed an estimated 1 million people. There have been 141 confirmed swine flu deaths worldwide and 27,737 cases reported worldwide.

Facing these dire circumstances, Chinese authorities issued a “Media Control” order on May 2, 2009 restricting television, newspapers and Internet websites from reporting news of the pandemic without proper permission.

The Beijing Internet Management Office, responsible for overseeing all registered websites in Beijing, notified all news website registrants on May 2, 2009 that they were prohibited from “spreading rumors.” All major news websites must report on the swine flu situation in Beijing according to the Beijing Daily newspaper or the Qianlong website content. Comments on websites cannot discuss anything related to the Beijing Epidemic Prevention Department and their medical observation of people entering Beijing from outbreak areas.

In addition, the Chinese government has told the media to control the scale of the pandemic reports. News websites’ homepage cannot display swine flu updates that exceed the length of a headline. All reports must use the “standard source.” All content related to the swine flu must focus on the dynamics or prevention and control measures while the magnitude of the pandemic and any social panic are definitely forbidden.

When news of a new suspected case of H1N1 in Guangzhou seeped out during the evening of May 1, 2009, the Guangdong provincial party committee immediately called every media, reminding them not to broadcast this news before confirmation.

Despite the government’s efforts, there is great anxiety among the people in Beijing. Disposable paper masks have become out of stock at many pharmacies, with people pre-paying to stock up on personal reserves of masks. The China Ministry of Health performed a public act in late April with officials eating pork to declare that “China’s pigs have no disease.” However, hundreds of pig carcasses have drifted in a river in Chengtuo Town, Fujian Province for days, according to an article in the local Dongnankuaibao newspaper.

Recently, pig carcasses numbering anywhere from ten to thirty have been found daily in the Nanhaidali section of the Pearl River in Guangdong Province. Beijing Institute of Technology professor, Hu Xingdou, said in an interview with Hong Kong’s Apple Daily that, “We definitely cannot hand off all the rights of speech to the local governments, or the SARS tragedy will repeat itself. The ultimate victims are still the community at large.”

