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China, Corporations and Internet Censorship

The Chinese government has developed sophisticated methods to monitor and repress the social-media activities of its 'netizens'. Internet censorship in China also reflects the tangled relationship Beijing presently has with Western internet companies.

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This week we have tried to determine just how much the internet and social media empower individuals or aid and abet corrupt and coercive regimes. Our unsurprising conclusion is that such media is Janus-faced – it does indeed liberate and repress. In the latter case, governments have become increasingly sophisticated in how they use the internet to maintain their grip on power. In this respect, the Chinese government's manipulation of social media to monitor and repress the activities of its 'netizens' stands out as a representative case study – a negative case study, unfortunately, that also reflects the tangled relationship Beijing presently has with Western internet companies.

Social unrest, social media, and Chinese censorship

Control and manipulation of mass media outlets has been part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) mandate for generations. However, the emergence of the internet and social media such as Facebook (not to mention micro-blogging sites like Weibo, the Chinese equivalent to Twitter) prompted a change in the CPC's approach to monitoring and censoring media outlets – i.e., it decided to decentralize its traditional oversight of China's mass media. But it was only after a number of ' mass incidents' (the official term for civil unrest in China) that Beijing developed a strategic approach to protect CPC ideology in cyberspace.

Arguably the 'mass incident' that best reflects China's new strategy for dealing with online unrest and social dissent is the 2008 Weng'an riot. The unrest occurred after a 16 year old girl was found dead in a river in Weng' an County, Western China. Officials initially claimed that the girl had committed suicide. However, speculation that she was actually raped and murdered by two young men with ties to the local public security bureau prompted a mass rejection of the official explanation of events and led to widespread local unrest. Demonstrators eventually turned to social media outlets such as YouTube to disseminate updates on events across China, leaving the authorities with little chance or time to put a lid on the story.

As similar unrest continued to occur throughout China, the government eventually decided to block many leading Western social media websites.Facebook and Twitter, for example, have been blocked in China since riots broke out in Xinjiang province in 2009, while Google's new social network,

Google+, has been [blocked since 2011](). In the latter case, however, Google first cooperated with Beijing's efforts to censor internet content. Its reasons for doing so, according to critics, were typical enough – it wanted to gain a significant foothold in one of the world's fastest-growing online marketplaces. In fact, it was only in the wake of widespread criticism of Google's complicity with state-censorship of the media that it eventually stopped censoring its content, before pulling out of China altogether in 2010.

The Google example notwithstanding, the main Western internet corporations remain eager to re-enter the online Chinese market. Despite already having 500 million internet users, China's online markets and communities continue to grow at a relentless pace. When the Western providers eventually return, they are likely to find themselves in direct competition with local internet companies like [Renren](), [Baidu]() and [Sina Weibo](). Indeed, China's internet providers are likely to have safeguarded their market shares by fully complying with Chinese censorship laws (although [censorship practices are not transparent]()). Accordingly, Beijing's message to the likes of Google seems quite clear. If Western companies do not comply with China's state-censorship requirements, they will remain excluded from the world's largest (and growing) online market.

It is a message that some companies seem to have heard loud and clear. Twitter, for example, recently introduced a new censorship policy that allows it to apply different censorship rules on a country-by-country basis. Unsurprisingly, this policy has been [well-received in Beijing]()despite [widespread criticism in the West]() . [Facebook]() and [Google]() also appear to have redoubled their efforts to re-enter the Chinese market, although it remains unclear whether either company is prepared to comply fully with the country's censorship regime.

Propaganda vs. free speech in a censored environment

So what kind of Chinese internet would companies like Google return to? As the emergence of local service providers demonstrates, China appears to have a vibrant online community which is being subjected to increasingly sophisticated forms of censorship. Instead of disrupting the flow of information by shutting down the internet, Beijing now sees the internet as a kind of safety valve for potential social unrest. Whenever something of public interest happens – an environmental disaster, for example, or a corruption scandal, or a strike – the government permits online debates to be conducted in a controlled environment.

Indeed, the decision to set online agendas and censor content led to the creation of tools like the[Fifty Cent]() [Party](). This is a group of bloggers that are paid by the government (approximately 50 cents per post) to influence and shape public debate online. These internet commentators are, for example, recruited at universities and provided with detailed instructions on how to respond to "politically incorrect" online posts. Accordingly, the Fifty Cent Party channels online debates in directions that are favorable to the CPC, and to report posts that deviate too much from official party rhetoric. And while nobody knows the exact size of the Fifty Cent Party, some estimate its membership to be as high as several hundred thousand.

Ironically, some netizens' attempts to defy the CPC's online propaganda have allowed Western companies to enter the Chinese online market through the backdoor. There are many instances, for example, of netizens circumventing China's 'great firewall' to access Western social media outlets via so-called proxy servers. This, in turn, demonstrates that Western companies are actually part of an elaborate cat-and-mouse game between China's netizens and the Fifty Cent Party. To further circumvent the censoring of 'controversial' online posts, many netizens have created an alternative internet language. So instead of writing "government" on online forums (which is easy to monitor) many began to use "zf" (the Chinese word for government is æ政åº or ZhèngfÇ) in order to confuse the censors.

The dilemma for Western companies

Having a foothold in the world's largest online marketplace remains a core objective of many Western internet companies, but the cost will be a heavy one – either comply with China's censorship requirements or stay locked out. As we write, 'mass incidents' [continue to be posted online](). One possible 'nightmare scenario' confronting the CPC is that of a 'mass incident' being fueled by social media and occurring in Beijing. It remains highly unlikely that Chinese internet services would ever provide coverage of such events. It is also likely that Western companies would be required to block such coverage on their websites. So the price of doing business with China (and indeed other authoritarian regimes) will involve a degree of self-censorship on the part of Western internet companies that will, in turn, make them vulnerable to widespread criticism by human rights advocates and others. It's not any easy conundrum for any company with a conscience to try and resolve.

Editor's note:

For more content on "The New Information Revolution," please see our [dossier]() on the topic.

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