CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> China has four million websites, with nearly 700 million Internet users, 1.2 billion mobile phone users, 600 million WeChat and Weibo users, and generates 30 billion pieces of information every day. It is not possible to apply censorship to this enormous amount of data. Thus censorship is not the correct word choice. But no censorship does not mean no management.
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> — Lu Wei, Former Director, State Internet Information Office, China, December 2015[1]

1.1 THE PUZZLE OF POROUS CENSORSHIP

As more people around the world gain access to the Internet, government censorship seems an increasingly futile exercise. Traditional conceptions of censorship that could completely control information, such as watertight bans on access, prepublication review, or government-enforced prohibitions on content, seem silly when you consider that every second millions of Internet users around the world are sending one another instant messages, participating in online forums, and tweeting to hundreds of thousands of followers. Even the world's most famous censors recognize this reality. As the former "gatekeeper of the Chinese Internet" Lu Wei stresses in the epigraph to this chapter, the thirty billion pieces of information generated each day by Chinese citizens quite simply cannot be censored.

[1] "美记者质疑中国"网络审查" 鲁炜:内容审查用词不当" December 9, 2015. Available at: http://news.china.com/domestic/945/20151209/20903585.html.

Yet recognizing the impossibility of complete control of online discourse has not kept authoritarian regimes from spending billions of dollars trying. On the face of it, authoritarian efforts of information control seem halfhearted. Even censorship in one of the most sophisticated censorship regimes in the world—China—could be seen as faltering attempts at "information management." For the most part, these efforts at censorship are porous—frequently circumvented by savvy Internet users, accidentally evaded by citizens wasting time on the web, and rarely enforced with punishment.[2]

Indeed, most censorship methods implemented by the Chinese government act not as a ban but as a *tax* on information, forcing users to pay money or spend more time if they want to access the censored material. For example, when the government "kicked out" Google from China in 2010, it did so simply by throttling the search engine so it loaded only 75 percent of the time.[3] If you wanted to use Google, you just had to be a bit more patient. The Great Firewall, China's most notorious censorship invention that blocks a variety of foreign websites from Chinese users, can be circumvented by savvy Internet users by downloading a Virtual Private Network (VPN). Social media users in China circumvent keyword censoring of social media posts by substituting similar words that go undetected for words that the government blocks, making content easy to find if you spend more time searching.[4] Newspapers are often instructed by

[2] Yang (2009*a*, pg. 2) describes many of the ways in which Chinese netizens circumvent Internet control and calls government control over the Internet "only partly effective." Xiao (2011) similarly emphasizes how Internet controls in China are easily evaded.

[3] Millward, Steven, "Google+ Not Actually Blocked in China, Just Being Slowly Throttled," *Tech in Asia*, June 30, 2011. Available at: https://www.techinasia.com/google-plus-china.

[4] Branigan, Tania, "How China's internet generation broke the silence," *Guardian*, March 24, 2010. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/24/china-internet-generation-censorship; Hiruncharoenvate, Lin and Gilbert (2015).

censors to put stories on the back pages of the newspaper, where access is just a few more flips of the page away.[5]

Porous censorship is not unique to China or even to the modern time period. Instead of shutting off the whole Internet, Iran has been known to simply throttle it and make it slower during elections.[6] The Russian government uses armies of online bots and commentators to flood opposition hashtags and make it more difficult, but not impossible, for people to find information on protests or opposition leaders.[7] Even before the Internet, in the late nineteenth century, British censors banned translations of French literature they considered obscene, but allowed untranslated versions to circulate freely, allowing unlimited access to those willing to expend the effort to read them in French.[8] In East Germany during the cold war, the government decided against enforcing restrictions on satellite dishes that enabled citizens to watch West German television, effectively allowing East Germans who were interested enough to find a way to buy a satellite dish to have access to it.[9]

Why do governments attempt to control information when these controls are easily circumvented? Conventional wisdom posits that these porous censorship strategies are futile for governments as citizens learn quickly to circumvent censorship that is not complete or enforced. Many have stressed that information, which is often called "non-excludable" because it is

[5] "Ministry of Truth: Personal Wealth, Income Gap," *China Digital Times*, February 6, 2013. Available at: https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/02/ministry-of-truth-personal-wealth-income-gap/.

[6] See Aryan, Aryan and Halderman (2013, pg. 5) and Esfandiari, Golnaz "Iran Admits Throttling Internet to 'Preserve Calm' During Election," *Radio Free Europe*, June 26, 2013. Available at: http://www.rferl.org/a/iran-Internet-disruptions-election/25028696.html.

[7] Goncharov, Maxim, "The Dark Side of Social Media," *TrendLabs Security Intelligence Blog*, December 7, 2011. Available at: http://blog.trendmicro.com/trendlabs-security-intelligence/the-dark-side-of-social-media/.

[8] Reynolds (2014, pg. 188).

[9] Kern and Hainmueller (2009, pg. 394–395).

easily shared, is difficult to control once it has become known to a portion of the public, as it can spread quickly.[10] "Information wants to be free," originally coined by Stewart Brand, captures the idea that information technology makes information easy to copy and thus difficult to control.[11] More puzzling is that many governments have the capacity to enforce censorship more forcefully, but choose not to do so. Periodic VPN crackdowns indicate that China could make the Firewall less permeable, but much of the time the government chooses not to.[12] The government could implement draconian punishments for those who evade censorship, creating strong disincentives for circumvention, but most circumvention is not even illegal. Using censorship that taxes, rather than prohibits, information in China—and in other countries around the world—seems to be a design choice, not an operational flaw—but why?

1.2 DISTRACTION AND DIVERSION

In this book, I shed light on the puzzle of porous censorship by showing that even easily circumventable censorship has an important impact on information access for the typical person in most circumstances, and, for this very reason, is strategically useful for authoritarian regimes. Many censorship methods require citizens to spend more time or money accessing

[10] Taubman (1998, pg. 266) stresses that the decentralized nature of the Internet means no censorship methods are foolproof. Yang (2009*b*, pg. 30) contends that online activism is powerful because it can be more easily multiplied. Esarey and Xiao (2011) show that digital media has more critical content than newspapers in China.

[11] Barlow, John Perry, "The Economy of Ideas," *Wired*, March 1, 1994. Available at: https://www.wired.com/1994/03/economy-ideas/.

[12] "China Cracks Down on VPNs During Political Meetings," *Wall Street Journal*, http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/03/10/china-cracks-down-on-vpns-during-political-meetings/.

information that the government would like to slow down. Only a minority of citizens who are interested enough in the information and have the education and resources to pay the costs of evasion are motivated and equipped enough to circumvent censorship. For the majority of citizens, who are less interested in politics and are not willing to spend significant time becoming informed,[13] small costs of access and government distractions can divert citizens to information that is less dangerous to the regime. Even though it is possible to access most information, as normal citizens get lost in the cacophony of information available to them, their consumption of information is highly influenced by the costs of obtaining it. I argue that there are massively different implications for the spread of political information of having certain information completely free and easy to obtain as compared to being available but slightly more difficult to access.

Part of the inconsistency between conventional wisdom about censorship and the reality of censorship results from the lack of conceptual clarity about the mechanisms by which censorship affects the public's consumption of information. We lack a theory of censorship. I provide a typology of the three ways in which censorship can affect individuals. What most people think of when they think of censorship is *fear*—threats of punishment, such as losing a job, prison, or worse—which may deter citizens from spreading or accessing information. Fear works by prohibiting particular information and through this inducing self-censorship. But the threat of punishment must be observable to be credible—those who are not aware

[13] Many scholars in political communication have shown that most people are not willing to spend time informing themselves about politics. For example, Sniderman, Tetlock and Brody (1991) show that voters rely on heuristics to make political judgements, Popkin (1994) explores how voters use information shortcuts to make choices, Conover and Feldman (1984) develop a theory of how people have ideology under low information, and Hamilton (2004, pg. 11) explains how media consumers can be rationally ignorant.

of punishment cannot be deterred by it. Although fear is a more complete form of censorship because it can be enforced, fear is problematic for authoritarian regimes because it can cause backlash, draw attention to censored information, and create information-gathering problems for governments. Fear is more difficult to use in the digital age because prohibitions on information are difficult for governments to enforce when information is easily copied.

The other two less well-known censorship mechanisms I introduce—*friction* and *flooding*—have proven themselves more useful in the age of the Internet. Friction—increasing the costs, either in time or money, of access or spread of information—diverts citizens' attention by imposing barriers to information access. A slow webpage, a book removed from a library, reordered search results, or a blocked website can all be used to increase the costs of access to information. Friction is often circumventable—it can be evaded simply by sustaining these costs. However, it does not have to be observable in order to work and therefore can more easily be explained away or go unnoticed. Friction's counterpart, *flooding*, is information coordinated as distraction, propaganda, or confusion, such as astroturfing, online propaganda, or government-mandated newspaper articles. Flooding competes with information that authoritarian governments would like to hide by diluting it and distracting from it. As with the friction mechanism, while flooding can be discounted or avoided, flooding requires the consumer to take time and effort to separate out good information from bad information.

I offer a wide range of empirical evidence—from online experiments to nationally representative surveys, datasets of millions of geo-located social media posts, and leaked propaganda archives—to show that friction and flooding effectively divert and distract most people away from censored information. Even though a minority of people will pay the costs to circumvent censorship, friction and flooding are useful to

governments because they separate those who are willing to pay the cost of evasion from those who are not, enabling the government to target repression toward the most influential media producers while avoiding widespread repressive policies. I focus my empirical evidence on the citizen production and consumption of information on the Chinese Internet. China is a nearly ideal case for testing how each mechanism of censorship affects citizens' consumption of information and political behavior because the Chinese government implements a wide variety of censorship tactics, which function through each of the three censorship mechanisms. Furthermore, China's censorship system has become the model for many authoritarian regimes: evidence exists that others are trying to emulate it.[14] A better understanding of how the Chinese censorship system works will allow us to predict the future impacts of information control across a wide range of authoritarian regimes.

Censorship is difficult to study empirically because it is often intended to go undetected. Recently, entire subfields in computer science have emerged dedicated to detecting censorship because governments are not typically forthcoming with their tactics.[15] In this book, I move beyond what is censored to take up the challenging task of measuring individuals' reactions to censorship *while* they are being subjected to it. Using large social media datasets, measures of the spread of online information, online experiments, and surveys, I answer the questions: How do individuals react when observing censorship? How does Internet users' behavior change when particular pieces of information are more difficult to access? Are Internet users who come across distracting online propaganda likely to spread

[14] See Diamond (2015, pg. 151), and Soldatov, Andrei and Irna Borogan, "Putin brings China's Great Firewall to Russia in cybersecurity pact," *Guardian*, November 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/putin-china-internet-great-firewall-russia-cybersecurity-pact. As a result, scholars have advocated for more research on the Chinese censorship system; see Shorey and Howard (2016).

[15] For an overview of the challenges measuring censorship see Burnett and Feamster (2013).

and share it? The evidence I present shows that although many people are resistant to censorship when they notice and observe it, they are very affected by it when they are inconvenienced by it, do not notice it, or can explain it away.

My findings of how censorship influences individuals may explain why we see so many regimes using porous censorship strategies even though these methods are easy to thwart. Although many would see the fact that a minority of capable citizens can route around censorship as detrimental to the regime's censorship efforts, I argue that circumventible censorship can be useful to authoritarian regimes precisely because it has different effects on different segments of the population. Porous censorship drives a wedge between the elite and the masses. The savvy members of the elite easily circumvent censorship, discount propaganda, read blocked information, and enter into banned social networks. By contrast, friction and flooding prey on the rest of the public's short attention spans, busy schedules, and general lack of interest in politics, nudging them toward an information environment that is disconnected from their more well-educated, well-to-do, and politically sophisticated counterparts. By separating the elite from the masses, the government prevents coordination of the core and the periphery, known to be an essential component in successful collective action.[16] Although a portion of savvy and politically concerned citizens may be willing to pay the costs imposed by friction and flooding, less interested individuals often are not, making wider discontent among the broader population significantly less likely and reducing the accountability of political entities.

The strategy of porous censorship allows the government to avoid widespread use of observable repression, which is well

[16] Barberá et al. (2015) show that the periphery is critical to the success of protests, Steinert-Threlkeld (2017) shows that the periphery can even instigate successful protests, and Chenoweth and Stephan (2011, pg. 39–40) show that total numbers and recruitment are a strong predictor of successful protest movements.

known to spark popular backlash.[17] Autocrats face significant trade-offs when making citizens fearful of speaking out. Highly constraining forms of censorship that operate through deterrence must be observable to their targets; otherwise deterrence cannot work. As I will show using social media data, surveys, and online experiments, when censorship is observable, political entities call attention to the information they would like to make off-limits. The observation of censorship intended to create deterrence can instead create opportunities for push-back, signal government weakness, and create increased interest in the off-limits topic. Repression that deters citizens from speaking out also creates information and surveillance problems for the government, as governments often rely on input from the media and population to identify local corruption and on information in the public sphere to identify new pockets of dissent.[18]

Incomplete censorship, by contrast, is more easily masked by political entities, giving the government the cover of plausible deniability.[19] Flooding can front as concerned citizens who are voluntarily writing pro-government content online or are spontaneously gathering in a pro-government parade, and friction can front as technological errors or algorithmic quirks, which ordinary citizens may not be aware of or may explain away. If a link on the Internet redirects to an error page, it is difficult to tell whether the page is down or the government has blocked it. If a book is missing from a library shelf, is it lost, not ordered, or removed by the government? If a social media post does

[17] Dickson (2016, pg. 7).

[18] Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009); Liebman (2005); Lorentzen (2014); Shirk (2011, pg. 19); Stockmann (2012, pg. 140); Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2017).

[19] Stockmann (2012) makes a similar argument about the traditional media in China, arguing that the commercialization of the media provides cover for government propaganda. The concept of plausible deniability has also been used widely in the literature on repression, for example, Conrad and Moore (2010, pg. 461) argue that plausible deniability of torture allows the state to shift the blame.

not appear in a news feed, is it because the algorithm predicts you might not be interested in it, or because of government manipulation?[20] Because information is widespread and has many substitutes, small impediments to reading information and even silly distractions can significantly affect users' consumption of political information.

The strategy of porous censorship does, however, have an Achilles' heel. Although for most citizens most of the time, small impediments to accessing information and government-encouraged distractions can divert them to more benign information, there are cases when the typical citizen will take the time to seek out restricted information and evade censorship. I show that in periods of crisis, such as the 2015 Tianjin explosion, citizens are more likely to spend time seeking out methods of accessing restricted information. Similarly, when censorship is imposed suddenly and disrupts habits, such as the case of the Instagram block during the 2014 Hong Kong protests, citizens are more likely to find ways to continue consuming information and entertainment to which they are accustomed.[21] Thus, the strategy of porous censorship can be counterproductive and dangerous to the regime when it uses this censorship too decisively during times it needs censorship most. If information were to disrupt the Chinese political system, it would be during a period when the majority of people were willing to pay the price imposed by censorship to collectively inform themselves.

1.3 IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

The findings I present in this book challenge many conventional notions of censorship and have implications for research

[20] See Knockel, Ruan and Crete-Nishihata (2017) for an example of how censorship is used surreptitiously in the Chinese social media platform WeChat.

[21] Hobbs and Roberts (2016).

in digital politics, the politics of repression, and political communication.

Censorship Is More Than Fear

First, this book speaks to the strategies that modern autocracies use to prevent large-scale dissent. Many scholars have puzzled over the resilience of some authoritarian regimes.[22] Some argue that the resilience of autocracies is due in part to successful repression; that autocrats have survived by forcefully extinguishing opposition groups.[23] Others have maintained that autocrats are successful in part by creating institutions that are better able to share power with the opposition and respond to citizens' concerns.[24] Still others have credited authoritarian resilience to brainwashing or enforced symbolism, through cult-like nationalism, religion, or ideology.[25]

In this book I demonstrate that autocrats have methods outside of direct repression, accommodation, or brainwashing to maintain power, even in the modern era. Autocrats have a large toolbox available to them to nudge citizens away from activist circles, dangerous information, and focal points that could facilitate coordination.[26] These methods are not forceful, do not accommodate, and are often not meant to directly persuade. Instead, they create small inconveniences that reroute users

[22] Nathan (2003); Anderson (2006); Gilley (2003).

[23] Davenport (2007, pg. 7) describes the "Law of Coercive Responsiveness," that autocrats respond to opposition movements with force. Brownlee (2007, pg. 33) argues that autocrats have been able to repress opposition groups to consolidate power.

[24] Wintrobe (1990, pg. 851) and Wintrobe (1998) stresses the patronage and public services dictators can provide as a substitute for repression. Dickson (2016); He and Warren (2011); and Lorentzen (2013) elaborate on how the Chinese government creates channels to respond to citizens' concerns. Magaloni (2008); Bueno De Mesquita et al. (2003); and Boix and Svolik (2013) describe how dictators create power-sharing institutions to prevent overthrow by other elite.

[25] See Wedeen (1999).

[26] Note that this is the same "nudge" logic with a darker take as that used in the behavioral economics literature; see Thaler and Sunstein (2009).

to information and social networks that are more palatable to the regime, decreasing the mobilization capacity for opposition, often without citizens being aware of it. Although less forceful than repression or brainwashing, these methods are surprisingly effective in changing the behavior of the vast majority of citizens who are too busy to engage deeply in politics.

Censorship Is Customized

Second, this book speaks to a long-standing question of whether and how governments can control social media in the information age. Many scholars believed that the Internet, which expanded the number of citizens involved in public discourse, would force governments to become more accountable to citizens because of the speed with which large numbers of citizens could participate in everyday public debate.[27] Yet the failure of the Internet to create the expected accountability in some authoritarian regimes led other scholars to argue that this new technology in fact played into the hands of the autocrats.[28] Some of these writers hypothesized that the Internet had not reached its political potential because of extreme self-censorship and fear.[29] Others discerned that the Internet created opportunities for authorities to use sophisticated hidden technologies that could manipulate citizens without their consent or being aware of it.[30]

The findings in this book cut a middle path between these arguments by showing that Internet censorship has very different impacts on different types of individuals, which allows

[27] Ferdinand (2000, pg. 5), Lynch (2011), Bellin (2012, pg. 138), Diamond (2010, pg. 70).

[28] Morozov (2011), MacKinnon (2012), Kalathil and Boas (2010), Rød and Weidmann (2015), Steele and Stein (2002).

[29] Kalathil and Boas (2010, pg. 26), Wacker (2003, pg. 88).

[30] MacKinnon (2012, pg. 6), Morozov (2011, pg. 97).

governments to use these differential effects strategically to maximize censorship's impact while minimizing its costs. The findings in this book suggest that the low probability of the government following through on punishment for millions of Internet users who engage daily in off-limits discussion has diminished the government's ability to enforce self-censorship on those engaged in public discourse. Self-censorship, by itself, does not "purify" the Internet in many authoritarian regimes as some have suggested, and online criticism of autocrats is commonplace.[31] For the majority of citizens, this book provides evidence that political entities have a wide range of effective tools available to them to interfere with the Internet without citizens being aware of it or motivated enough to circumvent it.[32] However, these tools work not because they are sophisticated enough to prevent access to information, but precisely because they have holes: they can affect the majority of the public's information-seeking behavior simply by inconveniencing them, without interfering so much to cause widespread public backlash. Small costs of access, not draconian punishments or sophisticated manipulation, can have huge effects on the behavior of the majority.

Because censorship affects different segments of the population differently, its impact is more than simply hidden manipulation and instead is a story of customized repression. The fact that the majority are affected by diversion and distractions allows regimes the flexibility to selectively target punishment for speech toward journalists, activists, and other high-profile elites. Because friction and flooding are not effective for highly capable and motivated individuals, autocrats use targeted

[31] Zhang, Yuxin, "China: Self-Censorship Displaces Western Threats," *Diplomat*, March 3, 2015. http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-self-censorship-displaces-western-threats/.

[32] This finding provides support for some of the arguments in MacKinnon (2012) and Morozov (2011).

fear to contain the spread of information at elite levels.[33] Just as the Internet has enabled more micro-targeting of information and advertising toward particular individuals, the evidence I present suggests that censorship as well is becoming increasingly customized to individual behavior and capabilities.

Despite the cunning of the Chinese censorship system, I highlight the ways in which the censorship system can be undermined in particular periods. I show that the regime is more constrained in making censorship porous during crises when individuals are motivated to seek out information. The more that citizens are willing to overcome friction, the less able the government is to use censorship methods other than fear. This puts the government in a difficult situation, as direct repression will frequently cause backlash. Although the government will try to ramp up all forms of censorship during periods of crisis, these are also the periods that are most likely to force government accountability and concessions.

More Media Does Not Always Lead to Better Information

I caution against a rosy economic model of information where more producers of information will always lead to better information outcomes. Some scholars have posited that as the number of producers of information and media outlets increases, the government's influence over the media will decrease because governments will have a more difficult time forcing media to keep silent.[34] One implication is that the digital age, where there are many more producers of information, will lead to a less biased news media.[35]

[33] This finding is more in line with arguments made in studies that emphasize the impact of fear in controlling the spread of information. Kalathil and Boas (2010); Wacker (2003).

[34] See Besley and Prat (2006, pg. 4), Gentzkow, Glaeser and Goldin (2006, pg. 189).

[35] Edmond (2013, pg. 1441).

However, these models only consider coercion of media and media capture as methods of censorship and do not consider the impacts that governments have on the *distribution* of information. The results in this book show that even if media that contains better information exists, if government can create frictions on the distribution of information through censorship, then this media will not reach most of the public.[36] Governments that have direct control over information distribution can use friction to de-prioritize media that they find to be objectionable. Even if articles on the Internet contain good information, if they are buried in a search engine by government censorship, very few people will access it.

Moreover, even if governments do not directly control the distribution of information, they can use the fact that anyone can enter into the Internet discourse to flood the information environment with their own version of events. By hiring paid commentators or distributing online propaganda, governments can crowd out information that they find objectionable, undermine the credibility of competing media, and distract citizens from events that reflect badly on them. Counterintuitively, the ability for anyone to produce media can result in the production of less reliable information because some governments and entities will have incentives and resources to produce and spread unreliable information en masse.

A Broader Definition of Censorship Has Implications for Democracies

Last, because this book is about censorship that does not always function through fear, it has broader implications for censorship outside of authoritarian systems. Democracies generally have

[36] Edmond (2013, pg. 1442) allows for the possibility that governments can invest in "large-scale fixed investments for information control" online that may allow them to control the Internet despite the decentralized nature of the Internet.

laws that prevent them from directly repressing free speech—they cannot use fear-based methods of censorship. However, democratic governments have vast powers to affect the costs of access to information by producing legislation that regulates information such as the availability of data, the transparency of the government, and the functioning of the Internet. The findings in this book suggest that even small impediments to access imposed by any regime can have significant political effects, and therefore that manipulation of information in democracies can also have a widespread impact on the public's political knowledge.

As I will discuss in the conclusion, recent events in democracies highlight the importance of a broader definition of censorship. Evidence that taxes on the accessibility of information can have large political impacts[37] suggests that society should be concerned with the extent that a few Internet companies and Internet service providers have primary control over the speed and convenience with which information can be accessed. If too few individuals, companies, or politicians wield significant power to make certain political information easy to access while making other information more difficult (for example through fast lanes on the Internet or reordering search results) in an effort to advance their own interests, this could have political impacts in democracies similar to the impacts of search filtering and firewalls in autocracies. Similarly, as traditional media have been decimated by competition from the Internet, small costs of access to data imposed by federal or local government may have an impact on content reported to the public in the traditional press. The broader definition of censorship I provide in this book emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing and

[37] Byrnes, Nanette, "How the Bot-y Politic Influenced This Election," November 8, 2016. Available at: *MIT Technology Review* https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602817/how-the-bot-y-politic-influenced-this-election/. Epstein and Robertson (2015), Bond et al. (2012).

facilitating government transparency and competition between information distributors as well as producers in democracies so that what information is provided, at what speed and when, to the press and public is not completely the result of political motivations and strategy.

Citizens in democracies recently have been shown to be susceptible to flooding as well. Distractions and misinformation spread online by cheap Internet commentators or automated bots increase the burden on the public to separate the signal from the noise, and many confuse good and bad information.[38] Denial of service attacks that flood the websites of media, Internet companies, nongovernmental organizations, and government with too much traffic so that they become unavailable have the power to silence information channels selectively.[39] As soon as these strategies are used for political purposes, they become political censorship. Although much censorship research has focused on the Internet in autocracies, more research needs to be done to study how censorship extends to democratic environments on the Internet as these undoubtedly have important political impacts.

1.4 THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

I proceed by offering a theory of the strategic interplay between government censorship and citizens' consumption and production of information. First, I describe the incentives of the government—why it would choose to censor and the costs it might incur from censorship. Next, I develop a model of how both citizens and the media interact with information.

[38] Nyhan and Reifler (2010), Ratkiewicz et al. (2011, pg. 301–302).

[39] Woolf, Nicky, "DoS attack that disrupted internet was largest of its kind in history, experts say," *Guardian*, October 26, 2016. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/oct/26/ddos-attack-dyn-mirai-botnet.

Using this model, I elucidate the three main ways in which censorship can influence the media and the public—fear, friction, and flooding. I then provide examples of each of these mechanisms in various communication media, and describe when each will have more or less impact on the spread of information. Fear, which is censorship based on deterrence, is by nature very constraining but must be observable in order to have an impact. Fear has to be credible in order to create deterrence; otherwise, it may instead draw attention to authoritarian weakness or create backlash. Therefore, it is discreetly targeted toward the most capable and motivated individuals. Friction, which imposes small taxes on information access, and flooding, which creates distractions, by contrast, do not need to be obviously driven by political entities to have an impact on information consumption and dissemination. Friction and flooding are more porous but less observable to the public than censorship using fear, and therefore are more effective with an impatient or uninterested public.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the modern history of censorship in China and outlines the institutional structure and methods of censorship in China today. It describes how the Chinese censorship system has evolved from a model that was designed to micromanage every citizen's consumption and production of information to one that relies on porous censorship. It provides an overview of the main methods by which the Chinese government censors the Internet and the bureaucratic system that implements this censorship. Practically, it describes why China provides a good empirical test for the impact of porous censorship.

Chapter 4 explores how citizens react when they observe censorship online in China. Although many scholars have suggested that fear and self-censorship are the main forms of control of the Chinese Internet, I show that typical Internet users do not act afraid after experiencing online censorship and instead

are angered by observing it. Using a matched pair study of users who forward the same social media post, but where one experiences censorship and the other does not, I study how experience with censorship affects the writings of Internet users. I find that, all else being equal, those who have experienced censorship persist in writing about the censored topic and are more likely to complain about censorship, even as they become increasingly targeted with censorship. I then survey Internet users about how they would feel if they experienced censorship. I find that Internet users, particularly those who report having experienced censorship, are much more likely to report being unfazed or angry about censorship than fearful or worried. Last, using online experiments, I randomly assign users in a lab experiment to come across a censored webpage. I find that the observation of censorship creates more, not less, interest in the censored topic and also decreases support for government censorship policies. I explore how the Chinese government, likely aware that experience with censorship can undermine its reputation, adopts a two-pronged censorship strategy targeting high-profile users with fear-based censorship while attempting to make online censorship efforts less observable to the public.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that small, less observable frictions on information have a powerful influence on the online behavior of Chinese citizens. First, I analyze the spread of information about 120 self-immolation events in Tibet through social media in China. I find that the best predictor of the number of social media posts that accompany a self-immolation event is whether the event occurs on the weekend, when the censors are slower to censor, suggesting that the speed of censorship has important implications for the spread of information in China. Next, I estimate the effect of the Great Firewall on the behavior of citizens in China. Using surveys and direct measures of those evading censorship through data from the social media platform Twitter, I find that those who evade the Firewall are

technologically savvy, well-educated, high-income Internet users in China who have high levels of political efficacy. I find that the Firewall pulls this political elite away from their potential followers. I show that newly blocked websites have precipitous declines in usage directly following their block, showing how small impediments to access have an immediate impact on traffic from typical Chinese users. But I find that friction has an Achilles' heel, and is more commonly circumvented during crises and moments of sudden implementation.[40]

In chapter 6, I demonstrate that flooding in both online and traditional news media in China coordinates messages to distract the public from sensitive events. Using plagiarism detection software and leaked archives from the Chinese government to identify instances of flooding both online and in traditional news media, I show that the government uses propaganda to distract with coverage of the mundane details of Party meetings or with encouraging quotes and positive thoughts directed at the public.[41] Using estimates of search results for reposting of propaganda articles around the web, I show that for the most part this strategy is effective—highly coordinated propaganda used by the Chinese government is more likely than articles that are less coordinated to be re-shared in both the domestic and international social media spheres.

Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of the implications of my findings for politics in both democracies and autocracies as information technology and social media become more central components of political communication. I lay out specific directions for future research in the area of censorship and discuss censorship's potential for long-term political impacts on domestic and international politics.

[40] This draws on work with William Hobbs; see Hobbs and Roberts (2016).

[41] This draws on work with Brandon Stewart, Jennifer Pan, and Gary King; see Roberts and Stewart (2016); King, Pan and Roberts (2017).

CHAPTER SIX

Information Flooding: Coordination as Censorship

In the afternoon of August 3, 2014, a 6.5-magnitude earthquake hit Yunnan province in China. The earthquake killed hundreds and injured thousands of people, destroying thousands of homes in the process. School buildings toppled and trapped children, reminiscent of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed 70,000 people, when the government was heavily criticized for shoddy construction of government buildings. Emergency workers rushed to the scene to try to rescue survivors.[1]

Eight hours after the earthquake struck, the Chinese official media began posting coordinated stories—not about the earthquake, but about controversial Internet personality Guo Meimei. Guo had reached Internet celebrity status three years earlier, in 2011, when she repeatedly posted pictures of herself dressed in expensive clothing and in front of expensive cars on Sina Weibo, attributing her lavish lifestyle to her job at the Red Cross in China.[2] Although Guo did not work at the Red Cross, her boyfriend, Wang Jun, was on the board of the Red Cross Bo-ai Asset Management Ltd., a company that coordinated charity events for the Red Cross. The expensive items that Guo had posed with on social media in 2011 were allegedly gifts from Wang. Attracting millions of commentators on social

[1] Jacobs, Andrew, "Earthquake Kills Hundreds In Southwest China," *New York Times*, August 3, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/04/world/asia/deadly-earthquake-in-southwest-china.html

[2] Hong, Haolan, and Jaime FlorCruz, "Red Cross China in Celebrity Crisis," *CNN*, July 6, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/07/06/china.redcross/.

media, the 2011 Guo Meimei scandal highlighted issues with corruption of charities in China, and donations to the Red Cross plummeted.

By 2014, when the earthquake hit, the Guo Meimei scandal was old news, long forgotten by the fast pace of the Internet. On July 10, 2014, Chinese officials had arrested Guo on allegations of gambling on the World Cup.[3] Then, out of the blue, on midnight of August 4, 2014, *Xinhua* posted a long, detailed account of a confession made by Guo Meimei that included admissions of gambling and engaging in prostitution.[4] On the same day, many other major media outlets followed suit, including major media outlets such as CCTV,[5] the *Global Times*,[6] *Caijing*,[7] *Southern Weekend*,[8] *Beijing Daily*,[9] and *Nanjing Daily*.[10]

The overwhelming number of newspapers sensationalizing the Guo Meimei confession on August 4 seemed too coincidental to be uncoordinated. Indeed, the *China Digital Times* received a government leak on August 4 that directed websites to "prominently display Xinhua and CCTV coverage of Guo Meimei, and to actively organize and direct commentary."[11]

3 "警方透露郭美美赌球犯罪细节：8人团伙 境外网站开户," *iFeng*, http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20140710/40171148_0.shtml.

4 "从炫富到涉赌，她为何堕入犯罪深渊？——郭美美涉嫌赌博犯罪罪被刑拘的背后," 新华, http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2014-08/04/c_1111914547.htm.

5 "郭美美设赌局牟利数十万 "商演"为名从事性交易," *CCTV*, http://news.cntv.cn/special/video/guomeimei/index.shtml.

6 "郭美美案件引外媒关注:郭美美栽了 公权力莫再栽," *Global Times*, http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-08/5095684.html.

7 "央视播出郭美美画面：素颜戴眼镜 戴着手铐下楼(图)," *Caijing*, http://politics.caijing.com.cn/20140804/3641759.shtml.

8 "'炫富女'郭美美涉赌被刑拘 想对红会说声对不起," *Southern Weekend*, http://www.infzm.com/content/102888.

9 "王军谈包养郭美美:她是我一生的噩梦," *Beijing Daily*, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-08-04/023930624032.shtml.

10 "郭美美：23年素描：20岁时因红会炫富事件走红," *Nanjing Daily*, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-08-04/014130623848.shtml.

11 "Minitrue: Guo Meimei's Confession," *China Digital Times*, August 4, 2014, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2014/08/minitrue-guo-meimeis-confession/.

The state propaganda apparatus seemed to be actively trying to engage the public with a story about a celebrity turned criminal and prostitute.

Why engage the public on Guo Meimei on that particular date? Many netizens and foreign media alleged that the Chinese government directed the coordination of news as a distraction from the Yunnan earthquake, which had the potential to reveal failings of the government's earthquake preparedness. Netizens noted that the Weibo account of the *People's Daily* posted a dozen times about Guo Meimei *before* reporting on the Yunnan earthquake—the major news story of the day—on the morning of August 4.[12] The focus on Guo, who had enraptured Chinese netizens years earlier, may have been a ploy to distract netizens from an unraveling crisis in southwest China.[13] In response, the Chinese Red Cross posted on its Weibo, "Rescue teams are working through the night, and time is of the essence. . . . So please, forget Guo Meimei."[14]

In the previous chapter, I showed that small costs that inconvenience online users can have important effects on citizens' online behavior, the spread of information about political events in China, and the potential for coordination between highly educated, internationalized citizens and the public. In this chapter, I focus on a different form of porous censor-

[12] Yuen, Lotus, "The Bizarre Fixation on a 23-Year-Old Woman," *ChinaFile*, August 6, 2014, https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/bizarre-fixation-23-year-old-woman.

[13] Boehler, Patrick, and Cece Zhang, 'I Like to Show Off': Chinese Celebrity Guo Meimiei Confesses to Prostitution, Gambling Charges on State TV," *South China Morning Post*, August 4, 2014, http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1566142/i-show-guo-meimei-confesses-all-charges-cctv-broadcast; "Heavy Media Takedown of Guo Meimei Angers Chinese Netizens," *Offbeat China*, August 4, 2014, http://offbeatchina.com/heavy-media-takedown-of-guo-meimei-angers-chinese-netizens.

[14] Larson, Christina, "Stated Confession of Alleged Call Girl Guo Meimei Distracts From a Charity's Earthquake Relief Efforts," *Bloomberg*, August 5, 2014, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-05/guo-meimei-falsely-claimed-to-be-a-big-shot-at-chinas-red-cross.

ship, *flooding*, or the promotion of information, which changes the relative costs of access by making competing information cheaper and off-limits information relatively more expensive.

The difference between friction and flooding can be explained by an analogy to taxes on something the government would rather people not buy, like gas-guzzling cars. If the government wanted fuel inefficient cars to circulate less within the economy, then it could either tax these cars directly, increasing the cost and therefore decreasing demand, or subsidize fuel efficient cars, which would increase the relative cost of fuel inefficiency and decrease demand. Similarly, the government can affect the cost of information by making the information harder to access (friction), or by promoting competing or distracting information (flooding). If successful, flooding-based censorship should have very similar effects to friction on the spread of information and the behavior of individuals.

The actual content of flooding can take a variety of different forms. As I show in the rest of the chapter, like the case of Guo Meimei, flooding in China often occurs when the government promotes information completely unrelated to a negative event the government would rather not be salient in the minds of the public. I will show a number of cases of flooding where government-flooded information is meant to distract. In other cases, governments use flooding to downplay or to control the narrative of an event by mandating the promotion of their own views on the event that compete with alternative views. This might be more likely to happen when the government has already lost control of a narrative of an event so that they cannot simply ignore it. Last, flooding sometimes has a more long-term goal, not in response to one event directly but with the intention to shape citizens' perspectives on politics. In these cases, flooding might be used to promote the government's overarching narrative about world events or encourage citizens to have a positive outlook on their own life. This latter type of

flooding may not be in response to one event in particular, but may be meant to shape citizen perspectives on politics and their reactions to subsequent crises.

In addition to affecting the relative costs of information, flooding also acts as a less observable form of censorship because it does not bring attention to the information the political entity is trying to hide. Information flooding occurs when a group or government promotes its viewpoint by ensuring that a particular piece of information or a particular perspective is repeated from many different sources in the news media or social media. Because of the repetition, this information is highly accessible and may be virtually impossible for citizens to avoid. Citizens are likely to come across the information and are likely to share it with others, and the more citizens spend time consuming the information, the more it will distract them from other ongoing events.

As I noted in the previous chapter, friction is less effective for governments during crises, as citizens may be more willing to go out of their way to seek out censored information and information may have already spread to large networks of people, making it difficult to control. When the government has less control over information it would like to stall, the government will often resort to spreading alternative versions of events or distractions to de-emphasize the negative information, even when they cannot prevent citizens from accessing it. Flooding can also be an attempt to gain control of the narrative of a quickly escalating story, rather than preventing citizens from knowing it in the first place. Flooding might also be relatively more effective when the public is searching for new information, or early in an unfolding crisis.[15]

Unlike friction, which can be measured by observing post removal or website blocks, flooding is more difficult to measure

[15] Baum and Groeling (2010) have found that the public is more manipulable in democracies at the beginning of a conflict, when they have accumulated less information.

because it is often disguised as the typical spread of information. To empirically test how information flooding strategies implemented by the Chinese government influence the spread of information online, I describe coordinated efforts by the Chinese government to publish information in traditional and online media. Drawing on previous work,[16] I show that coordination of information is designed as a censorship strategy by the Chinese government, to provide news stories and viewpoints that overwhelm existing news stories or online information. I identify instances of propaganda in Chinese newspapers using plagiarism detection software and identify propaganda posts by using leaked e-mail archives from Chinese online government commentators.[17] I find that these flooding efforts reverberate in both the domestic and the international blogosphere, suggesting that the Chinese government is in fact effective in distracting from alternative news sources and promoting its own version of events.

In the next section, I review information flooding as a method of censorship and highlight how it differs from previous theories of propaganda. In the following section, I discuss the use of flooding strategies by the Chinese government. I then describe the data I use to identify the Chinese government's flooding efforts. In the last section, I estimate how information flooding influences the spread of information online.

6.1 WHAT EFFECT CAN PROPAGANDA HAVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

Using similar logic to scholars who maintain that censorship is impossible in a digital age, many scholars have argued that propaganda, or the promotion of information, is also outdated

[16] Roberts and Stewart (2016).
[17] King, Pan and Roberts (2017).

in the age of the Internet.[18] These researchers maintain that propaganda can be effective only when the state can control the agenda, or when the number of sources of information is constrained. As the number of media sources has proliferated with the advent of the Internet, consumers of information have more choices over the sources of information. In these environments, consumers of information select out of biased state media sources and into sources with more "reliable" information.[19]

A few authors oppose this view, arguing that although state media is recognizable, propaganda is a signal of government power and therefore is closely followed by citizens.[20] Propaganda, in these authors' views, creates norms that citizens are trained to follow.[21] Even if this propaganda is unbelievable, by inducing participation in propaganda, the state can create rituals and standards that encourage compliance.[22] In particular, in China, the government emphasizes propaganda to promote cultural governance, appealing to citizens' emotions to prevent protests and keep them in line with government policy.[23]

In this chapter, I show that propaganda can also be effective as a form of censorship in the online environment by influencing the relative costs of information. Political entities coordinate propaganda by repeating information from multiple sources so that it is low cost to citizens. Because such repetition increases the availability of information to citizens, the population becomes more likely to consume propaganda, regardless of whether they can identify the source. The "flooding" of information in the news media and blogosphere by political

[18] Lynch (1999, pg. 3–4), Lieberthal (1995).
[19] See Stockmann (2012, Chapter 8).
[20] Huang (2015).
[21] Brady (2008, pg. 134).
[22] Wedeen (1999).
[23] Perry (2013).

entities works not so much to signal power as to prioritize the consumption of government-produced news over news produced by other groups or by citizens themselves. Propaganda is effective because political entities have the resources to make it easy to access and low cost, and, for impatient online users, low-cost stories are more likely to be read and to reverberate throughout the blogosphere.

Coordination of propaganda has long been used by governments and other organized groups to promote information. China's 1977 Propaganda Directive explicitly directs the Propaganda Department to coordinate stories among the news media in order to "promote the CCP's current line."[24] More recently, governments and mobilized interests around the world have organized "Internet armies" to flood the blogosphere at the same moment. Notoriously, the Chinese "Fifty Cent Party" allegedly pays Chinese netizens to post at the direction of the government. Although the Chinese have been criticized for this strategy, other governments have adopted similar strategies, including Israel, where representatives have been recruited to post on blogs that are "anti-Zionist,"[25] and recently Turkey, which has a 6,000-member social media team to write pro-government posts.[26]

Not only the central government, but also individual Chinese government officials and companies use coordinated flooding strategies to bolster support. These groups pay public relations companies or unemployed citizens to post positive accounts of

[24] Brady (2008, pg. 15).

[25] Liphshiz, Cnaan, "Israel Recruits 'Army of Bloggers' to Combat Anti-zionist Web Sites," *Haaretz*, January 19, 2009, http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-recruits-army-of-blogers-to-combat-anti-zionist-web-sites-1.268393.

[26] Albayrak, Alya and Joe Parkinson, "Turkey's Government Forms 6,000-Member Social Media Team Volunteers to Promote Ruling Party's Perspective in Sphere Dominated by Protestors," and *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2013, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/turkeys-government-forms-6000member-social-media-team-1379351399.

them online, like companies in the United States that will pay for positive reviews of their company on the web. Such actions have created scandals in China from time to time, because these local officials and companies regularly pay newspapers for articles that reflect positively on them.[27]

If governments, companies, and politicians were using such messages only to signal their own strength, they would want to take credit for these online messages. However, governments typically try to cover up the fact that they pay people to write online propaganda. Instead, they prefer that it appear as if "everyone" is writing pro-government comments or reporting a news story the government finds favorable or distracting. Part of the strategy of information flooding is issuing propaganda from many different sources, so as to disguise the fact that the information originated with the government.

Disguising the source of information flooding provides an added benefit to the government in that it has less potential to sully government credibility. Even though state news media already promote government versions of events, too much blatant government cheerleading may make the government media appear more biased. Except in obvious cases of coordination, like the Guo Meimei case described in the introduction, where netizens noticed the coordinated stories, most citizens may not realize that their local paper or the social media forums they visit are infiltrated with government propaganda. Incomplete control of the information environment allows the government to hide its own influence in the media by mixing with normal users.

By creating a multiplier effect in the news media and online, information flooding if successful can be worth the investment even though it is porous and cannot require readers to pay attention. The more sources a government or interest group can pay

[27] Chen, Wang, Shanshan Wang, Zhongyuan Ren, and Yishi Zhu, "Dirty Business for China's Internet Scrubbers, *CNBC*, February 19, 2013, http://www.cnbc.com/id/100472398.

to cover their story from their perspective, the more other news groups and other social media users pick up the story and share it with others. Flooding begets more flooding, and, if effectively done, this domino effect of information dissemination can be exponential. What began as a propaganda message can seem like an online event created by citizens as more and more people read and share the story.

Flooding creates friction for stories that are less desirable to the government. In interviews with Fifty Cent Party members, artist-dissident Ai Weiwei reveals that Fifty Cent Party members are often instructed to distract from current stories that are less desirable to the government.[28] This account is consistent with evidence from my work studying a leaked e-mail archive of online government-paid commentators that I describe later in this chapter.[29] Flooding of entertainment and "soft news" stories like the Guo Meimei confession brings these stories to the forefront at the expense of stories that could shed a negative light on the government. If citizens are distracted by the accessibility of flooded stories, they are less likely to read other stories.

6.2 FLOODING IN CHINA

Coordination of information to produce such flooding is key to the information strategies of the Chinese propaganda system. Like many organized groups, the Chinese government is in the perfect position to coordinate because it has the resources and infrastructure to do so. First, the institution of propaganda in China is built in a way that makes coordination easy. The Propaganda Department is one of the most extensive bureaucracies within the Chinese Communist Party, infiltrating every

[28] "An Insider's Account of the '50 Cent Party,'" *Freedom House China Media Bulletin*, May 12, 2011, http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/china-media-bulletin-issue-no-22/#2.

[29] King, Pan, and Roberts (2017).

level of government.[30] It is managed and led directly from the top levels of the CCP.

From the very top of the Party, messages are coordinated throughout the news media within China, through every medium of news, including television, print, and radio.[31] The government controls the personnel in every major media organization within China and requires each journalist to be government-certified. For day-to-day monitoring of content, the government issues propaganda directives to editors, who then decide what to include in the newspaper.[32] Post-publication monitoring is conducted by retired propaganda officials who make sure that newspapers are following the issued guidelines.[33]

The extent of newspaper coordination within China has waxed and waned throughout recent Chinese history. During the Maoist period and Cultural Revolution, articles within the *People's Daily* coordinated news around the country—smaller newspapers would reprint *People's Daily* articles when instructed.[34] With reform and opening after 1979, the coordination of news within China was significantly loosened and the Central Propaganda Department was weakened.[35] In the lead-up to the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement in 1989, newspapers were less coordinated, and several Chinese newspapers became well known as critics of the Party.

The events of 1989 caused a complete reversal in the CCP's strategy toward propaganda and coordination. After the crisis in Tiananmen Square, the government decided to strengthen its grip on propaganda. For example, in 1990, one of the Party's

[30] Lieberthal (1995, pg. 194–199)

[31] In this chapter, I focus explicitly on coordination within the print news and online media in China.

[32] Brady (2008, pg. 19).

[33] Brady (2008, pg. 22).

[34] Yu (1964, pg. 110–121).

[35] Brady (2008, pg. 40).

leading news agencies, *Xinhua*, was close to bankrupt. However, the government decided to use *Xinhua* as the coordinating agency following 1989, instructing newspapers to follow *Xinhua*'s lead on important events and international news, much as they had done with the *People's Daily* during the 1960s.[36] *Xinhua* is now one of the most profitable news agencies in the country because it leads the coordination of news.

Coordination of government media has now extended beyond traditional media to the blogosphere. As mentioned earlier, paid government commentators, or the "Fifty Cent Party," promote government-sanctioned news online. In addition, the government is known to contact high-profile social media users and important online opinion leaders before important events in order to coordinate political messages among highly followed social media users in China.[37]

6.3 DETECTION OF INFORMATION FLOODING IN NEWSPAPERS AND ONLINE MEDIA

In this section, I will show that coordination of information across government newspapers and online is often used for the purpose of censorship. In particular, coordination of information is used to distract from or prevent the dissemination of other types of information that the government would rather the public not see. I will show that the Chinese government uses newspaper and online propaganda not only to persuade, but also to throttle access to other forms of information. In the next sections, I will provide evidence that such coordination does indeed influence the spread of information online.

[36] Brady (2008, pg. 113).

[37] This strategy is described in case studies in propaganda documents, such as National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (2011).

To show that flooding is used for censorship, I must first identify propaganda. This is a difficult task because the spread of propaganda in China is a clandestine operation. For the most part, the government would rather that citizens not be able to distinguish propaganda from typical social media posts or the regular commercial news media. Stockmann (2012) describes how the commercialization of print media in China has allowed for propaganda to blend in with news, which may make it more believable and distracting for citizens, who may discount information that they believe originated with the government.[38] The government's online propaganda program is also a secretive enterprise where online propagandists attempt to blend into the normal social media environment. In this section, I use leaked propaganda directives from the government and leaked e-mail archives linked to online propagandists to reverse engineer general propaganda trends. I show that the instructions and trends in propaganda are consistent with an information flooding strategy intended to distract from alternative viewpoints or events that could negatively affect public opinion toward the government.

6.3.1 Identification of Propaganda in Newspapers

To identify newspaper propaganda in China, my coauthor and I combined leaked propaganda directives published online by the *China Digital Times*[39] with detection of coordination in a large collection of government newspapers.[40] Since the Chinese government uses propaganda directives to facilitate coordination, we reverse engineered propaganda by identifying days when all newspapers publish the same or nearly identical articles. We used the leaked propaganda directives to validate this measure

[38] See Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) for a description of how this phenomenon has impacted perceptions of Chinese legal policy.

[39] http://chinadigitaltimes.net/.

[40] Roberts and Stewart (2016).

and describe in more detail the kinds of instructions provided by the government to promote coordination. We found that large numbers of coordinated newspaper articles appear during sensitive political meetings and around sensitive political scandals, seemingly to distract or downplay the events.

To find coordinated newspaper articles, we collected every newspaper article from twenty-five provincial and city newspapers in China for the year 2012. The newspapers were scraped from each newspaper's "digital" website. These sites are different from the online news sites in that they contain only digital copies of the printed newspaper and do not include online advertisements. Although some Chinese newspapers' websites differ from their printed papers, the articles on the digital website reflect the content of the printed newspaper exactly. We recorded the date on which each article was published, the full text, and the page number of each of the articles. In total, the dataset contains 111,789 articles during the year 2012.

To identify moments of coordination, we grouped the articles by the date on which they were written. For each day, we compared each pair of articles written on that date to look for overlap between articles using open-source plagiarism detection software called Copyfind.[41] Copyfind works by identifying overlap between phrases of a specified length within the document pair. It then estimates the percentage of overlap in these phrases between the two documents, allowing for slight imperfections between phrase matches. High levels of phrase overlap indicate plagiarism, or in this case article coordination.

Of course, some forms of coordination between articles occur naturally, without directives from higher levels of government. Some newspapers may reprint *Xinhua* or the *People's Daily* not at the direction of the government, but to save on cost, a process called syndication. However, it is unlikely that coordination

[41] Copyfind software available at: http://plagiarism.bloomfieldmedia.com/z-wordpress/software/copyfind/.

of identical stories across the vast majority of papers would occur naturally simply because of syndication. Only seldom will editors of the majority of papers decide to report on the same story. In the cases where the story was important enough that all papers would want to print an article covering it, typically a subset of the papers will devote resources to printing their own version of the event. Therefore, syndication that occurs naturally, not by design, should occur across small subsets of papers, and almost never across every paper. If an identical story were printed across every paper, there is a high chance that coordination was designed by the Propaganda Department.

We found that reprints of newspaper articles across papers corresponded with this expectation. Among groups of article reprints, more than 50 percent of articles had a total of only two newspapers that printed overlapping stories. More than 95 percent of overlapping articles were featured in fewer than ten newspapers, or fewer than half of the papers. Less than 1 percent of overlapping articles had more than fifteen newspapers that were coordinated. Printing of identical news stories among large numbers of newspapers is a rare phenomenon.

To validate that the coordination among large groups of articles is by government design rather than by chance, we looked for leaked propaganda directives that correspond to the coordinated articles identified by the algorithm. The *China Digital Times* (CDT) contains a collection of both propaganda and censorship directives collected from journalists in China. These directives are posted on the CDT's website http://chinadigitaltimes.net.[42] If some of the highly coordinated days also correspond to leaked directives, this will validate that

[42] The vast majority of the leaked directives the CDT collects are censorship directives, detailing what the newspapers should not print rather than what they should print. Some of the CDT directives are a combination of censorship and propaganda directives, suggesting that if papers would like to write on a topic, they can only use the *Xinhua* or *People's Daily* version of events.

our algorithm is picking up moments of government-induced coordination.

Many of the coordinated events we found within the newspapers had corresponding leaked propaganda directives. In one example, a leaked propaganda directive on November 18, 2012, indicated that all media should emphasize a *Xinhua* article that urges readers to study and implement the 18th Party Congress's collective learning ideology.[43] In the newspaper corpus we collected, nineteen of the twenty-five newspapers printed a version of this article that had over 70 percent phrase overlap with others that had printed the same article, and all of the newspapers for which we could collect page numbers printed the article on their first page.

In another example, in March 2012, a propaganda directive indicated that newspapers should report the *Xinhua* version of a meeting between Wen Jiabao and reporters.[44] Nineteen out of twenty-three newspapers printed that day included the same version of this story. On November 28, 2012, a leaked propaganda directive indicated that newspapers should follow *Xinhua* in reporting on the death of Luo Yang, the main architect of the J-15 Chinese fighter jet.[45] Seventeen of twenty-three newspapers that printed that day had the same reprinted version of the story. The correspondence between these leaked directives and the coordinated articles with reprints across many papers provides

[43] "【真理部】中央政治局集体学习," *China Digital Times*, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2012/11/%E4%B8%AD%E5%AE%A3%E9%83%A8%EF%BC%9A%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E6%94%BF%E6%B2%BB%E5%B1%80%E9%9B%86%E4%BD%93%E5%AD%A6%E4%B9%A0/

[44] "【真理部】温总理记者见面会," *China Digital Times*, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2012/03/%E4%B8%AD%E5%AE%A3%E9%83%A8%EF%BC%9A-%E6%B8%A9%E6%80%BB%E7%90%86%E8%AE%B0%E8%80%85%E8%A7%81%E9%9D%A2%E4%BC%9A/

[45] "【真理部】罗阳逝世," *China Digital Times*, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2012/11/%E4%B8%AD%E5%AE%A3%E9%83%A8%EF%BC%9A%E7%BD%97%E9%98%B3%E9%80%9D%E4%B8%96/

strong evidence that highly coordinated newspapers are often the result of government efforts in propaganda.

6.3.1.1 Coordination: Sensitive Time Periods, on Sensitive Issues

Now that we have developed a measure of propaganda across provincial and city newspapers, we can identify when coordination is used by the government, to better understand the purpose of newspaper propaganda. Does coordination happen at regular intervals? Or during particular time periods? When does the Party decide it needs to control the information environment?

Figure 6.1 maps the number of coordinated events over time, where at least 70 percent of newspapers printed the same article. The largest numbers of coordinated articles occurred during Party meetings, particularly the extremely sensitive period of the power transition between Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping in November 2012. During this time period, there was extremely high coordination among papers—at the highest point, four separate articles were coordinated on one day across almost all papers. The coordinated articles that are printed during the meeting are about the proceedings of the events and Party ideology. By forcing all papers to print the same version of the event, the Party prevents alternative interpretations of the most high-level Party meetings and spreads the Party's perspective on its own governance.

The prevalence of propaganda during this period also aligns with journalists' own account of Party media control around important meetings. Journalists reported being required to avoid any negative news or commentary for the entire month of November 2012.[46] Further, many of the articles coordinated during this period were printed on the front pages of the

[46] Duggan, Jennifer, "China Internet Censored for Party Congress," *Al Jazeera*, November 17, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/11/20121115105540550384.html.

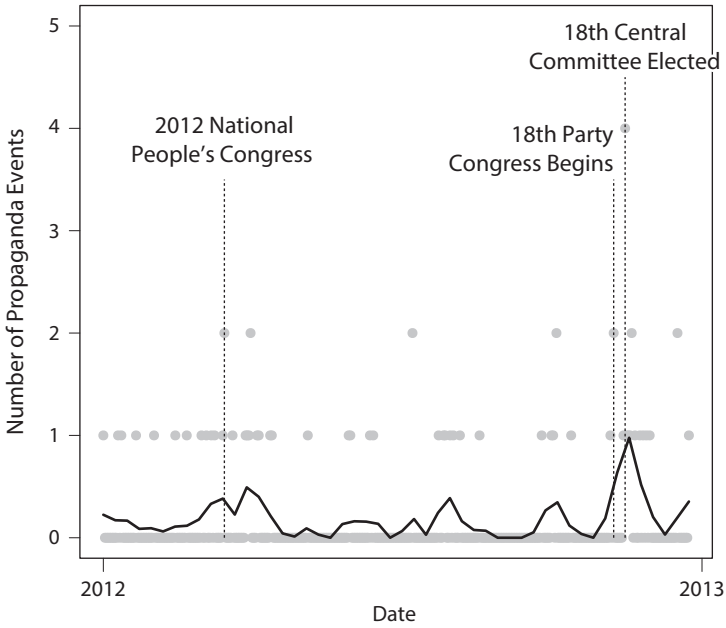

Figure 6.1: Number of times that articles are coordinated across more than 70% of papers by day, 2012. Highest levels of coordination appear during national meetings.

papers. The Party's interpretation of the meetings and news about the meetings were by design the first thing newspaper readers saw during the November transition of power from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, de-emphasizing other stories that could detract from the Party's spotlight or call into question the Party's power.

The other main cluster of coordinated news articles outside of the March and November meetings was in August 2012. This corresponds to an extremely sensitive event within the Party—the trial of the wife of the Party Secretary of Chongqing Bo Xilai, Gu Kailai, who was given a deferred death sentence in August 2012 for murdering a British businessman. The cluster of propaganda around this time may have occurred as a distraction

from this sensitive event. Although not all of the articles discuss the event directly, some allude to it, urging Party members to understand the full meaning of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," and encouraging Party discipline.

Coordination seems to be not only a tool to distract from sensitive events within the Chinese government but also a means of control of newspapers so that alternative views of these events cannot gain traction in the media. Articles relating to the sentencing of Wang Lijun and Gu Kailai in 2012 are frequently coordinated across papers and appear in the leaked propaganda directives, but the message is to de-emphasize the event. The purpose of coordination in these circumstances is to prevent the newspapers from providing alternative accounts of the incident or sensationalizing it, thereby explicitly censoring the editorial leeway of the newspapers.

Similarly, discussion of policies on the environment, corruption, food safety, real estate prices, and relations with Japan are also sometimes coordinated, again perhaps to prevent sensationalist versions of these events. Leaked propaganda directives associated with these events tend to instruct that they should be de-emphasized to the back pages of the newspaper and not "hyped."[47] Coordination, in this case, is used not to distract, as it is during Party meetings or sensitive periods, but to control the number of alternative stories about the policy implementation or sensitive event.

Overall, in this section, I showed that newspaper propaganda is often used as a tool of censorship by filling the front pages of the newspapers during sensitive periods and controlling reporting and placement of stories within newspapers on sensitive topics. Rather than always being used to persuade or cajole the

[47] "Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Food Safety," *China Digital Times*, August 17, 2012, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/08/directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth-food-safety/.

reader, as we often think of propaganda, the flooding strategy of the Chinese government is to affect the likelihood that readers come across particular articles or accounts of events. In the next section, I look to see whether these same strategies also appear in the Chinese government's approach to online propaganda.

6.3.2 Identification of Online Propaganda

To identify the online flooding strategy employed by the Chinese government, I turn to leaked e-mail archives from a local propaganda department. These archives, leaked by blogger "Xiaolan,"[48] provide several years of e-mail correspondence between a local propaganda department in Zhanggong county in Jiangsu province and government officials who had been tasked with posting online propaganda. Many of the e-mails include posts that internet commentators nicknamed the "Fifty Cent Party" made at the direction of the local propaganda department. Although we have no way of knowing whether the e-mail archive is complete, the leaked e-mails give us a window into the instructions and propaganda posts that were coordinated by government entities over this period.

In order to identify the online propaganda, a team of research assistants went through each of the 2,000 e-mails in the archive to extract the details and reports of the online propaganda posts. In total, the research assistants identified 43,757 online propaganda posts on around 2,000 accounts over a two-year time period.[49] A full description of the post collection process and full analysis of the posts are included in King, Pan and Roberts (2017).

[48] https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzzg.html.

[49] The archive's authenticity was verified by locating posts from the archive online.

6.3.2.1 China's Fifty Cent Party: Highly Coordinated Cheerleading

If propaganda were meant to persuade, online propaganda posts should address the political questions that are highly contested within the blogosphere. Current conceptions of online propaganda in China posit that the Fifty Cent Party is primarily tasked with countering anti-government rhetoric online. Social media users are accused of being Fifty Cent Party members when they defend government positions in heated online debates about policy, or when they attack those with anti-government views. In large part, scholars and pundits have viewed Fifty Cent Party members as attackers aimed at denouncing or undermining pro-West, anti-China opinion.[50] Fifty Cent Party members, for the most part, have been seen in the same light as traditional propaganda—as intending to persuade rather than to censor.

For the most part, however, the leaked online e-mail archive containing Fifty Cent Party posts does not suggest that the purpose of Fifty Cent Party posts is to take on critics of the Chinese government, or persuade people to support Chinese government policy. Very few of the thousands of posts in the archive were *argumentative* in nature or were aimed at defending the government against attackers or attacking its critics. Instead, the vast majority of Fifty Cent Party posts seem to be designed to distract from political arguments happening on the Internet. Like coordination among newspapers, the coordination of online propaganda serve as censorship or distraction, rather than for persuasion.

Instead of attacking, the largest portion of Fifty Cent Party posts in the leaked e-mail archive were aimed at *cheerleading*

[50] Bandurski, David, "China's Guerrilla War for the Web," September 24, 2008, https://blogs.law.harvard.edu/guorui/2008/09/24/chinas-guerrilla-war-for-the-web/; Lam, Oiwan, "When China Briefly Unblocked Facebook, Trolls Rushed In," *Hong Kong Free Press*, November 26, 2015, https://www.hongkongfp.com/2015/11/26/when-china-briefly-unblocked-facebook-trolls-rushed-in/.

for citizens and China—patriotism, encouragement or motivation of citizens, inspirational quotes or slogans, gratefulness, or celebrations of historical figures, China, or cultural events. Many of the posts were not even political in nature. For example, many remember heroes who sacrificed for China: "是你们抛头颅洒热血换来了我们今天的幸福生活，向你们致敬！你们永远活在我们心中!" "We salute you who shed your blood in exchange for our happy life today! You will always live in our hearts!" Others encourage citizens to keep trying to achieve their goals: "幸福不易须珍惜，明日振兴催奋进。" "Happiness doesn't come easily, so treasure it; tomorrow reenergize and advance with courage."

In order to measure the target of propaganda, we divided a random sample of 200 leaked Fifty Cent Party posts into five different categories. If propaganda posts were meant to persuade, the posts should fall into either (1) argumentative praise or criticism, including praise or criticism of the government that takes a position vis-à-vis another viewpoint; or (2) taunting of foreign countries, including comparisons of China to other countries with the sentiment that China is better, or insults toward other countries. These first two categories are how most pundits had described the purpose of the Fifty Cent Party in the past. If posts were meant to distract or change the subject, posts would fall into (3) non-argumentative praise or suggestions, including praise of current government officials, programs, or policies, which is not responding to an alternative viewpoint; (4) cheerleading for China, including patriotism, encouragement or motivation of citizens, inspirational quotes and slogans, thankfulness, gratefulness, inspiration or gratefulness for historical figures, or cultural references and celebrations; or (5) factual reporting, including descriptions of current government programs, projects, events, or initiatives, without praise or criticism.

We found that the majority of the leaked Fifty Cent posts, 85 percent, fell into the cheerleading category. The second

most prevalent type of post was non-argumentative praise or criticism (11 percent). The last type of post we found within the sample were posts that contained factual reporting about government programs or policies (4 percent). In the random sample, we found no examples of taunting of foreign countries or argumentative praise or criticism. In King, Pan and Roberts (2017) we use automated methods to extend this analysis to the rest of the post and to accounts that we predict to be associated with the Fifty Cent Party in other provinces. We find similar results; overwhelmingly, the posts we identify cheerlead and distract, rather than argue online.

The observation that most of the posts seem to be intended to make people feel good about their lives—and not to draw attention to anti-government threads on the Internet—is consistent with recent indications from Chinese propaganda officials that propagandists attempt to promote "positivity." The Chinese Communist Party has recently focused on encouraging art, TV shows, social media posts, and music to focus on creating "正能量," or "positive energy," to distract from increasingly negative commercial news.[51] Although sources do not directly lay out the reasoning behind this positive energy strategy, reorienting the public toward the positive instead of trying to counter negative criticism is a way to distract the public from negative online discourse without drawing more attention to it.

Not only do the leaked e-mails show that online flooding in China is aimed at generating positive sentiment rather than countering criticism, the timing of the posts themselves provide

51 "正义网：时代需要"周小平们"的网络正能量," 正义网 http://www.jcrb.com/opinion/zywy/201410/t20141023_1443348.html, "广电总局：鼓励拍摄正能量电视剧," 北京商报, http://it.sohu.com/20120904/n352242285.shtml,"媒体要准确把握舆论导向 传播社会正能量," 华商网, http://ehsb.hsw.cn/shtml/hsb/20141111/191042.shtml, "鲁炜：让网络空间清朗起来的"六个具体目标"," 千龙网, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/luwei/content-4/detail_2013_10/30/30805526_0.shtml

indications that online propaganda is used during sensitive periods and to distract from highly sensitive events. Figure 6.2 shows a timeline of the posts retrieved from the e-mails. Although the leaked archive gives us only a small view of the online propaganda system in China, the online propaganda effort like the coordination of articles in the newspapers is quite "bursty," or focused within particular periods. The two major bursts within the time period are focused on promoting Chinese patriotic festivals, including Qingming festival, which is a traditional Chinese cultural holiday to celebrate ancestors, and Martyr's Day, a new day created by the CCP to celebrate military heroes. A third burst is focused on the promotion of Xi Jinping's slogan the "Chinese Dream," which was a major focus of propaganda during the spring of 2013. A group of propaganda posts is also clustered around the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, an important Party meeting in November 2013, and another group of posts comments on a local government development initiative.

However, outside of these cultural, slogan, and meeting bursts, there are two large bursts of propaganda posts—one at the end of June and beginning of July 2013, and another in May 2014—which do not have an obvious purpose. These bursts contain typical cheerleading posts, making it difficult to determine the reason the posts were concentrated within such a short period.

A closer look at the e-mails associated with the first burst reveals that this concentrated set of positive propaganda may have been aimed at distracting from riots against the government in Xinjiang, which occurred on June 26, 2013, and killed 27 people.[52] The posts at the beginning of the burst are associated with an e-mail from the Zhanggong propaganda department

[52] Forsythe, Michael, "Xinjiang Violence Leaves 27 Dead after Clash with Police," *Bloomberg*, June 26, 2013, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-06-26/xinjiang-violence-leaves-27-dead-after-attack-on-police-stations.

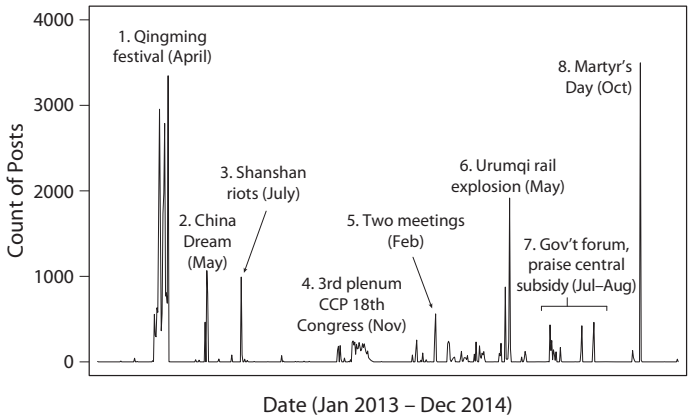

Figure 6.2: Timeline of Fifty Cent Party posts in leaked e-mail archive, reproduced from King, Pan and Roberts (2017).

written to a blind copied group of individuals only a few days after the riots with examples of online propaganda condemning terrorism in Xinjiang, promoting national unity, and promoting harmony between nationalities. One hour later, the Zhanggong propaganda department reported to the higher-level city of Ganzhou that its team had posted hundreds of microblogs promoting positivity, the Chinese Dream, tolerance, diversity, and revitalization. The timing of the e-mails suggests that the propaganda posts were a follow-up to the original posts that condemned terrorism in Xinjiang. It also suggests that when online propaganda is meant to react to a crisis only a small number of propaganda posts actually address the event directly. Instead, most posts are focused on distracting from the negative event with "positive energy."

The second burst of posts does not have an e-mail trail like the first burst, but its timing is also associated with an event in Xinjiang. On April 30, 2014, a knife attack and bombing in the Urumqi railway station killed three people and injured

dozens immediately following a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping.[53] In the days that followed, thousands of posts appear in the leaked dataset that cover a wide range of topics, including the people's livelihood and good governance. Although there is no direct evidence in the e-mail archive that the burst is a response to the bombing, the parallels between this burst and the one in June 2013 provide suggestive evidence that this burst, too, was created with the purpose of distraction.

6.4 THE INFLUENCE OF FLOODING ON THE SPREAD OF INFORMATION

Having described the logic behind flooding, I now show that government coordination of information has an important influence on the prevalence of information that appears within social media. Either because government efforts to spread information are high in volume or because netizens unwittingly pick up flooded information and reshare it, increases in coordination are associated with significant increases in the spread of government-sanctioned information online. As the ratio of government-initiated to citizen-initiated information online increases, citizens will be more likely to come across government propaganda relative to alternative viewpoints and will be more likely to share them.

To show this, I estimate the impact of both the coordination of newspaper articles and paid online commentators on the web. I find that the *particular wording* of the coordinated newspaper article spreads throughout both the domestic and also, more surprisingly, the international blogosphere, showing

[53] "Deadly China Blast at Xinjiang Railway Station," *BBC*, April 30, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27225308.

that information flooding strategies have a multiplicative effect on the spread of information. Next, I show that online discussions of Qingming festivals in recent years are many times more likely to reflect the government's framing of the festival, evidence that online propaganda indeed influences the tone of the conversation.

6.4.1 How Does Newspaper Coordination Influence the Spread of Information?

How does the coordination among newspapers in China influence the spread of information? If information is sufficiently coordinated, are others more likely to reprint these stories? Do social media users and other commentators pick up the same language used in the coordinated newspaper articles?

To answer these questions, I estimate whether newspaper articles that were more coordinated were more likely to appear on non-news sites and within individual social media posts. To do this, I take consecutive word strings from more coordinated articles to see if they appear more frequently on the web than those where there is less coordination among newspapers. For each unique cluster size of coordinated newspaper articles ranging from two to twenty, I sample 100 coordinated articles.[54] For each of these 1,290 articles, I sample five 30-character strings randomly from the text of the article. I then use the Google API to search each of these 6,450 strings on Google and record the number of search results returned.

I obtain three different search result metrics. First, I count the number of search results Google returned overall. I also count specifically the number of search results returned on sina.com.cn,[55] the most popular blogging site in China. Last, I

[54] For some coordinated cluster sizes, there were not 100 unique instances in my dataset. For these clusters, I took all of the coordinated articles.

[55] Using site: sina.com.cn within the search results.

count the number of search results returned on blogspot.com, the most popular blogging site within the United States, which is blocked by the Great Firewall in China.[56]

I measure the relationship between coordination and the number of search results, both within and outside of China. Figure 6.3 shows the number of coordinated papers on the x-axis, and the log of the search results on the y-axis. There is a very strong correlation between the degree of coordination across newspapers and number of search results containing the strings of the coordinated articles.

It could be that these results are simply a reflection of coordination by government propaganda workers who could repost the same wording as in the provincial newspapers at the direction of the Chinese government. However, within the leaked Fifty Cent posts, we did not see examples of the Fifty Cent Party reposting copies of traditional media stories on the web. We would also not expect the Fifty Cent Party to write social media posts on websites outside of the Great Firewall, such as blogspot.com, which are less likely to be frequented by the average Chinese citizen. The evidence suggests that the link between coordination and social media mentions is not simply through other coordinated measures initiated by the CCP. Instead, the multiplicative relationship between coordination and search results likely indicates that the propaganda is being reprinted by regular Chinese citizens and also by citizens abroad.

6.4.2 How Do Online Commentators Influence the Framing of a Holiday?

How do government online commentators influence the tenor and framing of online conversations? In this section, I study

[56] I used the Google API to do this, and close examination indicates that the number of returned search results is fairly accurate. The number of search results when you simply search Google from a desktop is often very inaccurate, which is why using the API (application programming interface) is important.

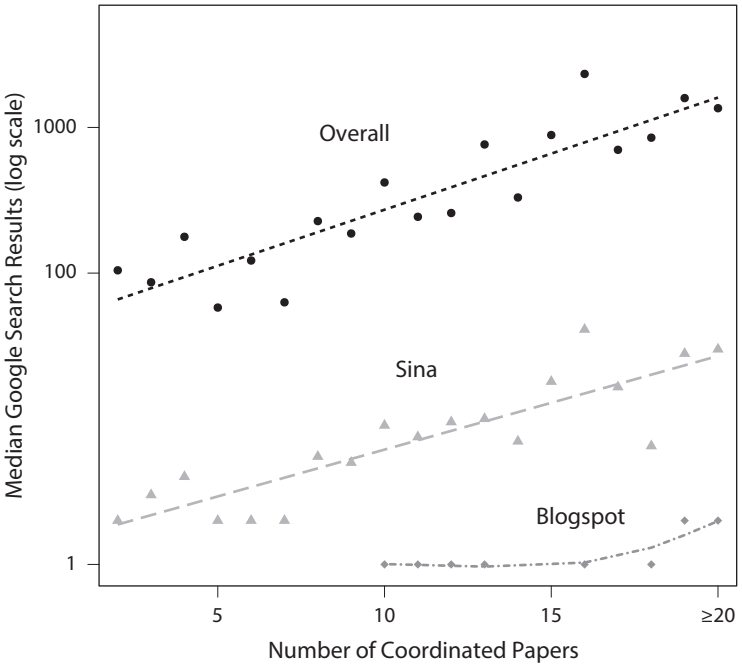

Figure 6.3: Relationship between average coordination and number of Google search results for all websites, sina.com.cn, and blogspot.com.

how the tenor of the online conversation about the Qingming festival in China has changed as the government's effort to affect online conversations through paid commentators has increased in recent years.

The Qingming festival, also known as the Tomb Sweeping Festival or the holiday of Pure Brightness, occurs every spring and is traditionally a time when Chinese pay respect to their ancestors by visiting their graves and presenting them with offerings. The holiday has its origins in ancient China, but was largely disallowed in the Maoist era. After reform, the Qingming festival has returned to China and is now widely observed throughout the country.[57]

[57] See Johnson (2016) for a discussion of the history of the Qingming festival and its current treatment today in China.

Qingming is problematic for the Chinese government because these rituals have frequently turned political. The Tiananmen Incident in 1976 originated in a gathering to remember former Premier of China Zhou Enlai on Qingming, but turned into a protest against government officials. The holiday brings attention to graves of those who were killed during sensitive political events, like the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest. In recent years, before the Qingming festival, in an effort to prevent instability, government police have detained outspoken family members of those killed on June 4, 1989.[58]

As Qingming has become more popular in recent years, the Chinese government has made an effort to take back the festival for its own purposes. In particular, the CCP has tried to link Qingming to the recognition of Communist martyrs by showing officials on television visiting the graves of famous revolutionary heroes.[59] This framing is consistent with an increasing emphasis on the CCP as a nationalist, unifying force by emphasizing the sacrifices the party has made to unify and provide stability and prosperity for the country and distracting from the more contentious history of the Qingming holiday.

The "martyr" framing of Qingming is reflected in the leaked Fifty Cent Party posts discussed earlier in this chapter. The largest volume spike in the leaked archive occurred on the Qingming festival (figure 6.2). Many of these posts link Qingming with revolutionary heroes. The burst contains posts such as: "Qingming is the day where we relive the fire of the revolution and we commune with the martyrs." ("清明是重温革命烽火,与先烈对话的日子"), "Mourn the martyrs, the great men who gave their lives for the birth of new China. Because of them we now have a happy life! Because of them we now have

[58] Laris, Michael, "Tiananmen's Edgy Proximity," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1999, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1999/04/06/tiananmens-edgy-proximity/bcb50b9f-9f7b-4bb6-9b22-d7badbded429/.

[59] Johnson (2016).

international status! Because of them the Chinese people can finally once again stand proudly among the nations of the world." ("深切悼念那些为新中国诞生 而献身的英烈和伟人们,因为有了他们我们才有现在的幸福生活! 因为他们,我们才有现在的国际地位! 因为他们,中华民族才又一次傲立世界民族之林.")

Can the CCP be successful in changing the tenor of the tomb sweeping festival with its coordinated framing of the festival? To study how the online conversation has changed as the government has increased its focus on online propaganda,[60] I gathered a random sample of social media posts on baidu.com, sina.com.cn, and sohu.com that mentioned the word "Qingming" during April 1–April 5 of each of the years 2012–2016. In each year, I counted the proportion of posts that mentioned the word "martyr" (either "先烈" or "烈士") during that period.[61]

The results are plotted in figure 6.4. Since Xi Jinping took office, there has been a remarkable six-fold increase in discussion of martyrs online associated with the Qingming festival. Although the word "martyr" was used in less than 0.5 percent of posts that mentioned "Qingming" on these websites in 2012, in 2014–2016 almost 3 percent of all posts that mention "Qingming" also mention "martyr." The increase in prevalence of posts equating Qingming with martyr's day reflects a shift in the way that online information portrays the holiday and its purpose to the public. It also shows that the government can wield significant influence over the tenor of the online discussion through flooding.

[60] Bandurski, David, "A 'Year of Innovation' for Internet Controls," *China Media Project*, January 7, 2016, http://cmp.hku.hk/2016/01/07/39575/.

[61] Posts were sampled from the online social media analytics company Crimson Hexagon.

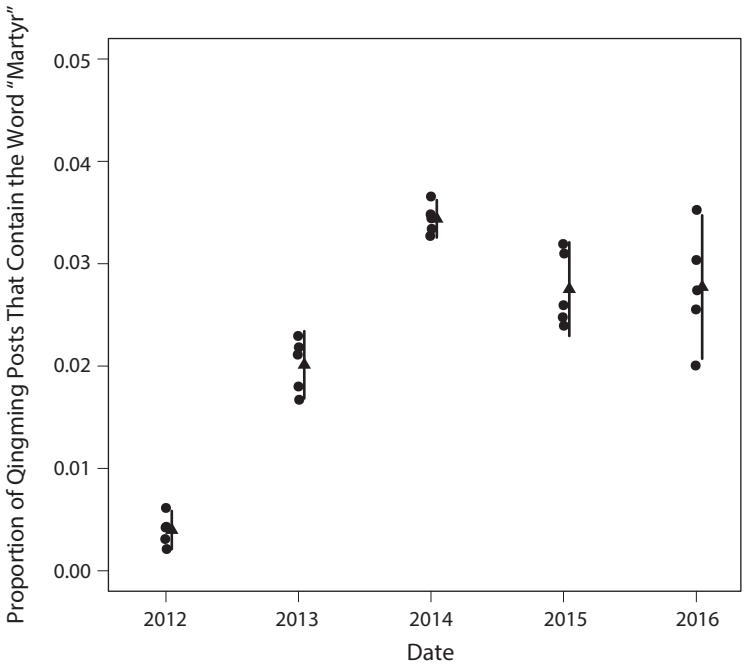

Figure 6.4: Proportion of posts about Qingming that mention martyrs, April 1–5, 2012–2016.

6.5 CONCLUSION

Information flooding is the least identifiable form of censorship of all the mechanisms described in this book. Particularly with the expansion of the Internet, the government can hide its identity and post online propaganda pretending to be unrelated to the government. Coordinated efforts to spread information online reverberate throughout social media because citizens are more likely to come across them and share them. Such coordination can distract from ongoing events that might be unfavorable to the government and can de-prioritize other news and perspectives.

We might expect that coordinated government propaganda efforts would be meant to persuade or cajole support from citizens on topics that citizens criticize the government about. However, the evidence presented in this chapter indicates that governments would rather not use propaganda to draw attention to any information that could shed a negative light on their performance. Instead, governments use coordinated information to draw attention away from negative events toward more positive news or their own overarching narrative, or to create positive feelings about the government among citizens. This type of flooding is even more difficult to detect, and dilutes the information environment to decrease the proportion of information that reflects badly on the government.