Cyberspace Surveillance in China: Arbitrariness and Censorship

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Introduction

When considering the People's Republic of China, one of the few remaining authoritarian nations, two reasonable images come to mind. One is that "China will continue to rise, not fade. Its leaders will consolidate the one-party model and, in the process, challenge the West's smug certainty about political development and the inevitable march toward electoral democracy" (Li 2012), while the other predicts that the one-party state would collapse if not democratized (Huang 2013). What is omitted from both perspectives is the impact of the internet, which renders the case of China more complex than the above two predictions. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and large numbers of surveillants monitoring online interactions, China's one-party state seems similar to the totalitarian superstate depicted in the novel *1984*. However, it has become clear that it is nearly impossible to construct a perfectly monitored state due to the liberalizing features of the internet. Consequently, the gap between an idealized but unachievable censored state and the pervasive fuzziness of liberal cyberspace has produced the unique characteristic of the censorship system in China: arbitrariness. Though extensive, divergence from the party line is punished arbitrarily. We will show how arbitrariness can co-exist with the censorship system and then examine its creep into cyber pop activism in terms of both state and non-state groups of actors. Doing so should illuminate the function of arbitrariness in the online propaganda of the CCP.

The Birth of Arbitrariness

The censorship system in China has changed significantly since it came into existence. To deal with the issue of relative freedom of public expression on the internet, cyberspace in China moved from a phase of initial network security, which is now common to other countries in the world, to the phase of content control which appeared after 2000 (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2000). This shift also signaled the intention of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shape the former regulatory regime into a control regime by strengthening both online censorship and the propaganda system (Han 2018). During the current Xi era, the transformation has been fully completed, and control

has also reached its peak. According to the Measures for Security Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks (1997), people in China are not allowed to view "harmful" information online. The definition of "harmful" varies from anti-regime literature to pornography and religion. Considering the arbitrary definition of harmful information, the punishment for transgression also appears arbitrary. For example, after the Urumqi riots in July 2009, full internet access to the Xinjiang province was not restored for a year, thus, in the view of the Chinese government administration, 'effectively isolating those calling for separation and arguably playing an important role in the overall stabilization of Xinjiang society' (The State Council Information of the People's Republic of China 2010). In contrast, in the most developed southeastern area of China, posting criticisms to the CCP online can be considered standard and is tolerated. The techniques used in censorship can be roughly divided into overall automatic taboo-word filtering and partial manual surveillance (Deibert 2015), which further increases the randomness of the entire censorship system as it is demanding to ensure consistency when everyone (even those who work as part of the system, e.g., appointees of the 50 Cent Army) makes their own decisions when detecting netizens who appear to "slander" the image of the regime. Therein lies a major difference with the 18th century jail structure of the panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham, which limits the ability of prisoners to know whether they are being watched. The building's circular tower structure and central control point compels prisoners to censor themselves in order to avoid punishments. Although internet control in China does share certain characteristics (organizational, technical, and administrative) with the panopticon (Tsui 2003), it is the unique arbitrariness of network control that determines its fundamental difference. The next section will examine how fuzzy arbitrariness in online propaganda affects cyberspace from the Chinese regime's point of view, both productively and counter-productively.

Pop Activism Diffused with Fuzzy Arbitrariness

As stated in the foregoing paragraph, the very arbitrariness of Chinese online censorship has allowed the internet to become the most liberal public space in China. Thus, a considerable level of cybercultural

pop activism has appeared online, which in return makes the relatively free space even fuzzier and has led to blurred boundaries between itself and present-day politics (Han 2018). The features of common online pop culture around the world are creativeness, fuzziness, and related modes of expression (Han 2018). However, the development of creative language patterns aimed at delivering political views without using taboo words defines online pop activism in Chinese social media and distinguishes it from that of others. Moreover, due to the liberalizing characteristics of the internet as a public space — the only outlet for relatively free speech in China — the rate of netizens being political online is much higher than the number of people being so offline. As a result, the relative proportion of creative language patterns that was initially used to avoid surveillance or automatic filtering has increased with netizens who pursue a political goal, in contrast to that of those who do not. The phenomenon of dissemination blurs the boundaries of permissibility and rejects the dichotomy which divides the one-party state cyberspace into only regime challengers and controllers (Damm 2007). This involves the engagement of netizens who spread the unique language patterns purely for fun. Meanwhile, among political netizens, two categories that pursue entirely disparate goals can be determined, those against censorship and those who are pro-regime. Disregarding contrary ideologies, both groups have adopted language patterns mutually created during online debates (Meng 2011). This indicates how cybercultural pop activism may start from the expression of politics without the risk of being randomly punished, then go on to be distributed by netizens for their own sake (e.g. "climb over the wall" for coolness, pornography), and ultimately counter-consume its original political content as the patterns become overused slang words. In the following paragraphs we will further demonstrate both productive and counterproductive ways of arbitrariness by way of examining several specific netizen group-based engagements and interactions.

Arbitrariness and the 50 Cent Army

To further demonstrate the impact of both positive and negative effects of arbitrariness, this and the following section will analyze one online community each. Here, a state-sponsored online community—officially named 'internet commentator,' also called the 50 Cent Army, or 50 Cent Party,

is explored for its function and effects in online space. A common misconception is that internet commentators are directly hired by the state and administrated centrally. However, these online trolls rather function under the umbrella of local enterprises (usually subsidized or funded secretly by local governments) that follow the orders of the local government (Han 2015). Thus, the cooperation of the 50 Cent Army and the CCP forms a commercialized propaganda system, which functions mainly to benefit the stability of the authoritarian regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by manipulating online public opinion and conveying feedback of mainstream views to the central government (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). This method is simple, and comments in response to the latest online news — which can be either political or apolitical as long as it contributes to the stability of society under the regime's control — can be altered instantly. The result is that ordinary netizens who subsequently read the news are influenced by these manipulated comments which predominately defend or praise the CCP. For the counterproductive aspect of the 50 Cent Army, the function of arbitrariness and its resulting liberalized cyberspace is to allow netizens to distinguish between manipulating commentators and genuine ones. It is easily discerned that distorted or falsified information provided by employed commentators, i.e., those SNS users who repeat content (eulogizing the official party line) in their homepages, includes outdated official words and rarely interacts with other netizens (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). The reason for the ease of telling the difference is that the employed commentators lack job motivation due to their low salary, which is approximately fifty cents per post/comment. Moreover, the discrepancy between the perceptions of central government and local government online trolls contributes to obvious differences. From the perspective of the local government, the locally controlled troll serves more as a tool for covering local political scandals while taking credit for its loyalty to the central government (Han 2018). The large amount of news propagated by online commentators conveying central government perspectives proves the alliance of local government with the 50 Cent Army. Consequently, whatever the political stand netizens take, they are wary of manipulated commentators and avoid being overly affected, resulting in the counter-productive effect of the 50 Cent Army. Let's now examine the naturally formed stratification of common netizen groups.

Arbitrariness and Non-State Actors

As touched upon in the foregoing section, netizen groups have formed to reject the dichotomy dividing Chinese cyberspace into only pro-regime and regime-challenging segments (Damm 2007). In terms of the arbitrariness feature of online public spaces in China, netizens feel encouraged to express themselves more directly, bringing about a multifaceted point of view among non-state actors and forming relatively closed communities that uphold internally consistent standards (Tang 2009). The non-state actors can be roughly classified into four distinct communities:

- the subversive freedom-loving fighters

- the rational regime defenders

- the neutral netizens who are wary of both sides

- the fanatical patriots who are most active in the current Chinese SNS (also called 'pinky')

During the process of community formation in cyberspace, the boundaries establishing homogeneity within a community are repeatedly shifting and rebuilt. Group identity is formed with actors initially identifying themselves as potential members of a given faction. As group identity strengthens, polarization occurs through interactions with fellow community members, resulting in an us-vs-them atmosphere between actors who take contrary political stands (Hu 2018). There is also the fear among netizens that their real identity may be made public, which is an implicit risk in internet autonomy. This promotes an adversarial atmosphere which encourages derogatory online labelling wars and reinforces identity (Han 2018). The productive aspect of the CCP's propaganda system is that the rational defenders of the nation indeed spare no effort trying to convince the neutral netizens of the party view. As a result, the present mainstream is dominated by fanatical nationalists due to the efforts of these defenders and augmented internet control in the Xi era. On the counterproductive side, even regime defenders can realize the existence of online censorship and criticize the system within their homogeneous community. However, they seldom present their discontent to outside regime-biased communities in order to avoid supporting the arguments of those they believe to be subversive actors (Huang, Gui, and Sun 2019).

Conclusion

The internet, serving as an irreplaceable, commercial tool in the modern economy and as an area for public expression, can generate significant risks both in economic development and internal stability in China's one-party state. Random occurrences of subversion and suppression have become inevitable as a result of the liberal cyberspace. Research of censorship and online surveillance in China not only aims to promote internal democracy but also provides an opportunity to understand how digital authoritarianism has appeared in many other regimes which attempt to mimic the Chinese model. With the realization that arbitrariness may be an obstruction to CCP interests, the party has strengthened control, shrinking the space for free online expression. In conclusion, the current Chinese cyberspace functions as one of the subversive forces opposing the totalitarian surveillance regime. However, there is a slight possibility of an online 'Arab Spring' to occur in China if world-wide attention, including on-going research, remains focused on this issue.

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