

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Hearing on China's Information Controls, Global Media Influence, and Cyber Warfare Strategy

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Dr. Margaret E. Roberts
Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of California, San Diego

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony to the U.S.-China Security and Economic Commission on the topic of China's global media influence and censorship. Censorship is pervasive in China and affects much of the media that the Chinese public regularly consumes. As such, it has important implications for the Chinese economy, U.S. companies in China and U.S.-China relations.

In this testimony, I explain how different segments of the Chinese public are affected differently by censorship. While high-profile media producers in China are targeted with threats of punishment for speech, for most people in China censorship acts like a tax on information, requiring them to spend more time or money to access it. Even though the information is possible to access, because it is not easy, censorship reduces the number of people who consume it. Censorship that creates taxes or frictions on information is often less visible than censorship that is created through fear of punishment, and many citizens in China are not aware of censorship even as they are affected by it. Even though many people in China do not support censorship and are angered by it when they observe it, because of the low visibility of censorship and the inconvenience it causes, only a small proportion of the public takes the time to evade censorship restrictions. Only during moments of crisis or when habits are suddenly broken is a broader segment of the public willing to take the effort to seek out censored information.

In this testimony, I will first overview the different types of censorship in China. I will then explain how different segments of the Chinese public experience censorship and how they view censorship when they are asked about it or become aware of it. Next, I will outline the types of people who are willing to evade censorship in China and the moments in which a larger proportion of the public are likely to circumvent censorship. Last, I will provide policy recommendations that follow from these observations. The framework and much of the research in this testimony come from my forthcoming book, *The Censorship Tax: How Citizens Respond to The Market for Information Within China's Great Firewall* and from work that my co-authors Gary King and Jennifer Pan and I have published in *Science* and the *American Political Science Review*.¹

Mechanisms of Censorship in China

The Chinese government uses a variety of censorship methods to control information in the traditional and online media. I divide the Chinese government's methods of censorship into three main categories: fear, or censorship that threatens punishment; friction, or censorship that imposes costs on information access and spread; and flooding, or censorship through distraction or dilution of information.

Fear includes any censorship method that intimidates or punishes speech with the purpose of inducing self-censorship. Censorship laws are sufficiently ambiguous in China so that they can be used to target a wide-range of media and social media users.² However, in practice, fear is used to selectively target high-profile individuals like the journalists, activists, entertainers, academics, and those with large online followings. While the incidence of punishment for speech has increased under President Xi Jinping, who has expanded and tightened censorship laws, most of the focus of Xi's censorship crackdown has still been aimed at high-profile individuals within the media and online. In recent years, many journalists, social media users with large followings, and activists have been sentenced to prison or otherwise reprimanded because of their speech.³

However, typical people talking and writing about politics in China are for the most part not targeted with punishment for personal or online speech. While there is always a small possibility that typical Internet users and Chinese citizens would be punished for speech, it is rare. Instead, average citizens in China are affected by another category of censorship: friction. Friction includes methods of censorship that do not make information off-limits, but act as a tax on information – forcing users to spend more time or money to access the information. The Great Firewall of China, which blocks select foreign websites from Chinese IP addresses, is the classic example of friction. The Great Firewall can be circumvented with a Virtual Private Network (VPN), but downloading and using a VPN costs time and money. Content filtering – when social media companies in China remove social media posts at the direction of the government --and keyword blocking – where posting or reading social media posts are filtered by keywords -- are other examples of friction in China.⁴ While it is usually *possible* to find information about the censored event online, the removal and filtering of social media posts makes information about these events more difficult to find and lessens its spread.

The Chinese government also uses a third form of censorship targeted toward the public: flooding, or producing distracting media in order to saturate the media environment and out-compete information about events that reflect badly on the government. In a forthcoming article in the *American Political Science Review*, my co-authors and I show that the Chinese Communist Party – government workers hired to write social media posts pseudonymously at the direction of the government -- introduces approximately 448 million distracting social media posts cheerleading for the Chinese government per year, focused during crisis events.⁵ Similarly, Chinese newspapers are instructed to coordinate articles during major meetings and sensitive time periods to crowd out alternative viewpoints.⁶ Like friction, censorship through

flooding acts as a tax on information by increasing the burden on citizens to distinguish good information from bad information. While it is possible to discount flooded information, doing so requires more effort and time than taking easily accessible information at face value.

Experience with Censorship and Citizens' Views of Censorship

The three categories of censorship – fear, friction, and flooding – illustrate why it is important to distinguish between those who are punished for their speech in China and those who are mostly affected by censorship that taxes information. Those who are under the close watch of government censors – high profile social media users, journalists, academics, and activists – are constantly aware of censorship and regularly navigate the fine line between in-bounds and out-of-bounds topics.⁷ They interact with censors who are often their editors and their bosses. Because the government uses the threat of reprimands to control them, censorship is very visible to these individuals and is a regular part of their lives.

For most people in China, however, censorship is much less salient even as they are affected by it. The public in China is less likely to be punished and less fearful of censorship. Instead, the public is affected by taxes on information imposed by the removal of social media posts, introduction of propaganda, and the imposition of the Great Firewall. Many of these censorship methods are invisible and the public is not aware of them. A representative survey of urban residents in China I describe in my book revealed that even among Internet users, only half know that the Great Firewall exists.⁸ Recent surveys in 2014 and 2015 suggest that few people report having had their posts or accounts deleted.⁹ However, post deletions of others' necessarily affects what information individuals read, and most users will not notice when others' posts go missing. Therefore, many will not be aware of how censorship influences the social media posts they come across online.¹⁰ For those who do come across censorship, many may explain it away as an Internet error or a computer problem and not attribute it to the government.

The fact that censorship of the typical citizen is less observable because it imposes taxes on information rather than creating fear clarifies why even though censorship is unpopular in China we do not see widespread backlash. While Chinese citizens support government regulation of spam, false information, pornography, and rumors on the Internet, they in large part do not support censorship of online communication and censorship that infringes on individual freedoms.¹¹ When people observe censorship, they are also often angered by it. Surveys show that many people in China report being angry and not fearful when they have a post removed online.¹² In online experiments I have conducted, I have found that those who experience censorship in a lab setting are less likely to support government censorship subsequently.¹³ However, because many users are unaware of the pervasiveness of censorship that uses friction and flooding online, such backlash is less widespread than it would be if censorship were a more salient part of their lives, as it is with many media producers.

VPN Use in China

Given that the Great Firewall of China blocks some of the world's most popular websites from China, it is puzzling that very few Chinese Internet users use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to evade it. Indeed, surveys show that only around 3-5% of urban residents in China report using a VPN.¹⁴ This is corroborated by online data as well: there are around the same number of Twitter users who regularly geo-locate to China as there are users who geo-locate to Hong Kong (where Twitter is not blocked), even though China has around 100 times the online population of Hong Kong.¹⁵ This suggests that the Great Firewall is largely effective in preventing Chinese citizens from accessing blocked websites, even though it can be circumvented.

Why don't Internet users in China circumvent the Firewall? The Great Firewall imposes a tax on information on blocked social media sites – information beyond the Firewall requires time and money to circumvent. Like any tax in an economy, this means that only those who have high demand for the information and increased ability to pay will be willing to evade the Firewall. For the others, attractive alternatives within China mean that they are less willing to spend the extra effort required to access blocked websites and would rather substitute with websites that do not require a VPN.

This is largely corroborated by survey evidence within China. When Internet users who reported that they did not circumvent the Great Firewall but who knew that circumvention was possible were asked why they chose not to circumvent it, many said that they did not have a reason to, they did not know how, or that it was too bothersome. The draw across the Great Firewall was simply not great enough to overcome the inconvenience in evading it. Very few reported that they were fearful to jump the wall. Instead, users were simply not willing to pay the cost in time and money of evasion.

Consistent with this theory, those who do evade censorship generally have more resources to evade censorship and more reasons to jump the Firewall, making them willing to pay the cost of evasion. Those who report in surveys being willing to evade censorship have higher incomes, more education, and are much more likely to be younger than those who do not evade censorship. They also have an interest in foreign information – they are more likely to work at a foreign enterprise, have traveled abroad, and are much more interested in politics and international politics than those who do not use VPNs.¹⁶ Overall, those who were willing to evade censorship are the economic and political elite: interested in information over the wall and willing to seek it out. The Firewall acts as a regressive tax – allowing those with more capabilities to access information, but largely keeping out those who do not have the time, knowledge, or resources to facilitate evasion.

Yet even though many are not typically willing to jump the Firewall in China, there may be some time periods when users are more willing to evade it. When censorship is suddenly imposed on websites that users are accustomed to accessing or during time periods of crisis with low information, users may have higher demand for information across the Firewall. In recent work,

my co-author William Hobbs and I have shown that the sudden block of Instagram during the protests in Hong Kong decreased overall use of Instagram from mainland China, but inspired the download of what we believe to be millions of VPNs from China and subsequently expanded use of blocked websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Wikipedia from China.¹⁷ Because people were accustomed to using Instagram, when it was suddenly blocked they downloaded VPNs to evade the Firewall. Similarly, survey evidence indicates that many more people access VPNs in the few days after crises like the 2015 Tianjin explosion.¹⁸ During crises and protest events, the government may be less able to control the spread of information because the public has a greater incentive to take the time to seek information out. It is no wonder that much of friction and flooding in China therefore seems to ramp up to control information during protest events and crises, as my co-authors and I have shown in work studying the targets of censorship and propaganda in China.¹⁹

Implications and Recommendations

The Chinese censorship program has important implications for the U.S.-China relationship. First, it imposes an economic cost on both U.S. and Chinese businesses. U.S. firms are blocked by the Great Firewall, which limits their access to the Chinese market. Censorship harms Chinese businesses and innovators. Students and entrepreneurs within China are handicapped by censorship because some of the best technologies in the world are blocked within China. Social media companies in China are burdened with requirements to hire censors in order to comply with government regulations.

Second, censorship has long-term implications for the way in which Chinese citizens view the United States. Because of the taxes censorship imposes on outside information, the Chinese public in large part consumes very different media than that consumed by the Western world. Over the long term, the different patterns in media consumption between the U.S. and Chinese public is likely to drive a wedge between these publics' understandings of politics which could increase the likelihood of international conflict.

While we should be concerned about both of these implications, it is more practical to focus policy on the economic impacts of censorship because the effects are tangible and accrue over the short-term. In addition to U.S. government's efforts to shed light on the human rights implications of censorship, the government should also consider treating censorship as a tax on information that distorts the domestic and international market for information. In its 2016 annual report, the U.S. Trade Representative labeled China's Great Firewall as a trade barrier.²⁰ Practically, this is true – the Great Firewall lessens the competitiveness of blocked foreign websites in China by requiring that Chinese Internet users spend money and time accessing them. Since the U.S. economy has a fast growing information economy, censorship functions as a barrier to trade that has large impacts on U.S. business. Since there are no similar barriers that the U.S. imposes on information from China, this relationship is not reciprocal.

Like any trade barrier, censorship also hurts firms working domestically in China. Surveys by the American Chamber of Commerce show that 71% of U.S. companies operating in China report

that the inability to access certain websites from China hurts their business.²¹ Censorship imposes huge uncertainties about the future business prospects of social media companies in China.²² Scientists in China have complained that the Great Firewall stifles innovation and disrupts knowledge.²³ The reduction of censorship in China would not only be better for U.S. business, but would help the Chinese economy as well.

The U.S. government could focus on calling censorship for what it is – a tax – and revealing the impacts that censorship has on other areas of the economy. More research should be done to quantify the economic impacts of censorship. Censorship is regressive in that it allows highly educated and affluent users in China to access information that their less equipped fellow citizens cannot. How does this impact the development of human capital, inequality in China, and those seeking reliable information about health, the environment, and the Chinese economy? By arming ourselves with knowledge about some of censorship’s less well-known but likely pernicious impacts, we will better be able to make a case for why all parties will benefit from reducing the barriers to information.

¹ Roberts (2014), Roberts (2018), King, Pan and Roberts (2013, 2014, 2017).

²² Censorship laws prohibit a wide range of speech, including information that “harms the interest of the nation,” “spreads rumors or disturbs social order,” “insults or defames third parties,” or “jeopardizes the nation’s unity.” Translation at: “Falling Short: Appendix II: Media Law in China,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, <https://cpj.org/reports/2008/06/12ii-2.php/>

³ For a summary of the recent government crackdown on journalists and activists, see “China Events of 2015.” *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/china-and-tibet>.

⁴ See King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) and King, Pan, and Roberts (2014) for studies of content filtering. See Hilts et al (2016) and Knockel et al (2017) for a discussion of keyword blocking.

⁵ King, Pan and Roberts (2017).

⁶ See leaked directives on the *China Digital Times* website, such as “中宣部： 中央政治局集体学习。” URL:

<https://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/>

⁷ See Stern and Hassid (2012).

⁸ Roberts (2018).

⁹ Dickson (2016) and Roberts (2018).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the invisibility of censorship, see Knockel et al (2017).

¹¹ Dickson (2016) and Roberts (2018).

¹² Dickson (2016) and Roberts (2018).

¹³ Roberts (2018).

¹⁴ See Farris et al (2010). Also calculated in Roberts (2018) to be 5%.

¹⁵ Hobbs and Roberts (2017).

¹⁶ Roberts (2018).

¹⁷ Hobbs and Roberts (2017).

¹⁸ Roberts (2018).

¹⁹ King, Pan and Roberts (2013, 2014, 2017).

²⁰ "The 2016 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers." US Trade Representative. URL: <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2016-NTE-Report-FINAL.pdf>

²¹ "2016 China Business China Survey Report." The American Chamber of Commerce in the People's Republic of China (2016). URL: <https://www.amchamchina.org/policy-advocacy/business-climate-survey/2016-business-climate-survey>

²² "Costs of Censorship Haunt 'Chinese Twitter' IPO." *Wired*. April 17, 2014. URL: <https://www.wired.com/2014/04/weibo-ipo-cost-of-oppression/>

²³ "China's Great Firewall is Harming Innovation, Scholars Say." *Time*. June 1, 2016. URL: <http://time.com/4354665/china-great-firewall-innovation-online-censorship/>

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