

Fear and Anger on the Chinese Internet: The Struggle Between Censors and Netizens

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Commissioner Dr. Larry M. Wortzel, Commissioner Carolyn Bartholomew, and Distinguished

Commission Members,

My name is XIAO Qiang. I am the founder and editor-in-chief of China Digital Times, and an adjunct professor at the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley. Founded in fall 2004, China Digital Times is an independent, bilingual media organization that brings uncensored news and online voices from China to the world. My research at the School of Information also focuses on revealing the hidden mechanisms of state censorship, mapping online political discourse and developing counter-censorship technologies to expand the free flow of information in China and global cyberspace. It is an honor to be among my distinguished fellow panelists, in front of this important commission.

It has been almost 25 years since the Tiananmen Massacre. China and the world have changed enormously since then. Over the past 25 years, one of the biggest transformations in Chinese society has been the dramatic growth of the Internet. The rise of online platforms has given Chinese “netizens” (in Chinese, *wangmin*) an unprecedented capacity for self-publishing and communication within a heavily censored environment. The instantaneous, interactive, and relatively low-risk nature of blogging has empowered netizens to voice political opinion, form social connections, and coordinate online (and sometimes offline) collective action.

The Chinese leaders views the Internet as vital to economic and technological development, but they are fearful that free speech, combined with the free flow of information, could destroy both their political legitimacy and control over society. Since the beginning of the Internet entered China, the government has also been expending significant resources to maintain control over both Internet content and public access to that content. These efforts have escalated since President Xi Jinping took office in the fall of 2012, and since he established the Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group in 2014.

My research and practice in the Internet freedom domain have allowed me to closely observe and document the interplay between censorship and resistance in Chinese social media. I believe this approach provides a unique lens to understand the contradictions in Chinese society today, and the possibilities for tomorrow.

In 2012, a study conducted by Professor Gary King at Harvard University found that online Chinese censors delete calls for collective action, but not simple criticism. My observations differ somewhat from the research mentioned above—or rather, they complement King’s study. The censors absolutely do their utmost to prevent collective action. However, judging from the content of many propaganda directives and deleted posts, China’s censorship system also works hard to suppress the following types of information from spreading online:

1. Unfavorable information about high-level leaders and their families.
2. Fundamental doubt and direct challenges to the legitimacy of the political system.
3. Divulgence of the inner workings of China’s power system, including the police and military, as well as the censorship system itself.
4. Symbolic figures of resistance, as well as people and organizations involved in opposition. Names such as Liu Xiaobo and movements such as Falun Gong fall under this category.
5. Media and citizen journalists’ reports that are out of sync with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Central Propaganda Department, such as elections in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the Arab Spring.
6. Major historical events, such as Mao Zedong’s rule, the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward and ensuing Great Famine, and the protests and crackdown of 1989.

In past three years, China Digital Times has collected over 2600 leaked censorship instructions, issued from 2004 to 2014. We also track censored content, using tools such as FreeWeibo’s archive of deleted Weibo posts. We have detected, documented, and published over 2400 keywords banned from Sina Weibo search results. Among these keywords are 155 words on the subject of the Tiananmen Massacre. It is the single most banned topic on the Chinese Internet. These blocked keywords not only show how the government makes an enormous effort to suppress the collective memory of this historical event, but also indicates how Chinese netizens insist on discussing it.

The government's pervasive and intrusive censorship system has generated massive resentment among Chinese netizens. This is true especially since the advent of Weibo and WeChat over the past five years. These two major social media platforms have become a part of now China's 618 million Internet users' daily life. The rapid growth of the population of mobile Internet users, which surpassed 494 million in January, has also had an impact on resistance to the official narrative. Keyword filtering, post deletion, closing user accounts, and real name registration policies have not been able to fully control online political discussion and public opinion. In fact, censorship often fuels netizens' determination to discuss sensitive topics. Censorship makes netizens angry, but not afraid, and without fear, they will only continue to talk about the forbidden.

The Chinese government is now resorting to offline measures, cracking down on digital activists and influential online opinion leaders in order to intimidate millions of ordinary people. The authorities have arrested prominent Internet commentators and publicly humiliated them through forced confessions on national television. Targets have included the American citizen Charles Xue, who was detained in Beijing last year under the charge of "prostitution," and Chinese journalist Gao Yu, who was recently charged with "leaking state secrets." The Chinese authorities hope to create a chilling effect, forcing netizens to self-censor.

Despite the authorities' fear-inducing tactics, resentment of censorship continues to grow among netizens and the general public. As I have followed Chinese social media, it has become clear to me that more and more netizens are less intimidated by repressive measures. The official media and the government are losing their credibility and legitimacy in this process. I draw my conclusion from the growing number and frequency of deleted Weibo posts on forbidden topics, and from the rapidly growing number of Chinese Internet users using circumvention tools to access blocked websites outside the Great Firewall, including China Digital Times.

For example, local and central authorities have been trying for years to quiet protest against the construction of plants processing paraxylene (PX), a chemical used in plastics manufacture. In 2007, online resistance to a PX plant in Xiamen spawned new language, as netizens called for people to "take a walk," a euphemism for street protest. Not trusting government assurances about the safety of PX plants, people have been "taking walks" against their construction all over China, most recently in Maoming, Guangdong this April.

There has been much of this "leaderless" collective action in Chinese society lately. But there is also another online phenomenon: public figures as icons of democracy and freedom, emerging from the dynamic interplay of censorship and resistance.

One of China's most prominent free speech and human rights lawyers is now in police custody. On May 3, Pu Zhiqiang and 14 other activists, scholars, and writers gathered for a seminar about

the Tiananmen Massacre. Pu and at least four others have been accused of “creating a disturbance,” a crime under Chinese law.

Pu Zhiqiang, himself a student protester in 1989, has defended several high-profile free speech and civil rights cases in recent years, including artist Ai Weiwei and activist Tan Zuoren. Just this past December, the mainland magazine *Chinese Newsweek* named him the “rule of law person of the year” for 2013. His willingness to take on politically sensitive cases, his outspoken nature, and his national fame have earned him the respect of many in the Internet generation.

Chinese netizens are now speaking out against Pu’s detention under the heavy censorship. For example, Weibo users are resorting to film references to show their support for him. On May 6, actress and model Zhang Ziyi recommended on Weibo that her 20 million followers watch the 2013 South Korean film *The Attorney*, a story inspired by the life of former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun. Prior to being elected president of recently democratized South Korea in 2003, Roh was a tax lawyer who, after defending student protesters, became a human rights lawyer. Without mentioning Pu Zhiqiang, Zhang Ziyi implicitly praised him by comparing him to the lawyer in the film.

Another Internet celebrity has also chimed in to support Pu Zhiqiang. Zhou Zhixing, the editor-in-chief of two major journals read by China’s power elites, posted on the following to Weibo on May 12:

Joining the Party used to be sacred, but it has been made profane; going to school used to be joyful, but has been made somber; going to prison used to be miserable, but has been made glorious. “It’s not that I don’t understand / it’s just that this world changes quickly.”

(The last sentence is a lyric by Cui Jian, China’s first rock and roll icon, who rose to fame during the 1989 student protests.)

Despite the massive deletion of online messages of support for Pu Zhiqiang, both Zhang Ziyi and Zhou Zhixing’s posts are still prominently displayed on Weibo, with tens of thousands of comments left untouched. This is a prime example of the Chinese Internet and Chinese society today: people have gradually lost their fear of, and reverence for, state power. Zhou voices an increasingly common feeling that those who are sent to prison for championing democracy and human rights are “good people” and that they are suffering for the better of the nation. It is the state, which has put these people in prison, that is on the wrong side of history. The psychological foundation of freedom from fear is being formed.

Through my work observing Chinese Internet censorship and public opinion, I have seen a clear downward trend in the credibility of official media, trust in the government, and the ideological legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Meanwhile, resentment of censorship has built. The connection facilitated by the Internet gives netizens a sense of "togetherness" and makes them less fearful of speaking the truth. Since online censorship has not stopped people from speaking, the Chinese government must rely on harsher crackdowns in the offline world to intimidate the public and create fear.

Over the past decade, Pu Zhiqiang has worked on human rights and constitutional rights cases. He has chosen to stand with those who suffer under the current system, and to lend his voice to those who are voiceless in Chinese society. He has also confronted his persecutors, and brilliantly tapped into the power of the Internet and media. By doing so, he has become the country's most well-known human rights lawyer and a living symbol of ideals of the 1989 Tiananmen protest. By detaining him and his fellow public intellectuals, the Chinese government has essentially made Pu's case and urged netizens to discuss Pu and the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement.

Congress should urge President Obama to press the Chinese government to release Pu Zhiqiang, Liu Xiaobo, and other political prisoners in China. It should also stay firm in its message of human rights and democracy while engaging with China in economic and other areas, and while providing greater support to expand Internet freedom in China and around the globe.