2014

Individual rights and government control: A qualitative study of China's censorship

Di Pei
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd
Part of the Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/13999

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Individual rights and government control: A qualitative study of China’s censorship

by

Di Pei

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:

Daniela V. Dimitrova, Major Professor

Tracy Lucht

Richard Mansbach

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2014

Copyright © Di Pei, 2014. All rights reserved.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. CASE STUDY</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIMITATIONS</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPLICATIONS</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFORMED CONSENT</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

China’s Internet has been the subject of much public debate as to whether it has contributed to political change and the progress of individual rights in China. It is hard to ignore the extent to which government control is widely applied online in a variety of ways while discussing the Internet in China. Censorship has had a tremendous impact on China’s Internet and has also become an unavoidable topic in public discourse regarding the development of the Internet in China, because it has turned into an inseparable part of China’s Internet.

This study aims to explore the online experience of Chinese individuals with censorship in China. A case study of the Wukan Protests was used to reveal the practical application of censorship on China’s Internet in terms of political news reporting. Additionally, 12 interviews were conducted to try and determine Chinese individuals’ awareness and perspectives about how censorship works in their daily lives. The findings of this study indicate that the open and effective censorship in China impacts participants’ attitudes toward media when it comes to news reporting. The findings showed that interviewees tend to critically and selectively view political news both online and offline. It was also found that Chinese Internet users who have experienced the effects of the Great Firewall may develop high levels of self-efficacy in determining media credibility with respect to political news reporting.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support and help of my committee members for their willingness to serve on my committee. I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Daniela Dimitrova, who had guided me throughout this challenging process. Thank you for your precious trust and inspiring guidance. You have been an important and influential professor in my life. I would also like to thank Dr. Tracy Lucht. This thesis could not have been completed without your insightful advice and valuable edits. I am indebted to you for your generous help. I am also grateful to Dr. Richard Mansbach; I consider it an honor to work with you and thank you for the constructive suggestions.

Special thanks goes to Dr. Michael Bujeya for his guidance, patience, and support throughout this research and the writing of this thesis. His insights and words of encouragement have often inspired me and renewed my hopes for completing my graduate education.

Finally, I own my deepest gratitude to my husband, not only for always providing unconditional support and words of encouragement, but also for his belief in my capabilities of writing this thesis.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

China’s Internet has been the subject of much debate in public discourse as to whether or not it has contributed to political change and the progress of individual rights in China. In contemporary China, despite the rapidly commercialization and growing autonomy of media, the mainstream media, such as TV, radio, and newspapers, are still controlled by the Chinese government as a political instrument through which to impose and deliver the legitimacy of the Communist Party. However, the rapid growth of the Internet provides individual users with an opportunity to express their political views and to make their voices heard. By the end of December 2013 there were 618 million Internet users in China; among them 53.58 million were newly added in comparison to the previous year (CNNIC, 2014). China’s Internet penetration has reached 45.8% of the population (CNNIC Report, 2014). There is substantial evidence that the Internet in China has become a challenge to government control and a force for democratization. Yang Guobing (2009), the author of the book *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, has examined China’s online activism for more than a decade. Yang (2009) believes that the Internet has revolutionized individual expression in China, and further claims that online activism has created both a communication revolution and a social revolution in China, and that in the end Chinese society is heading toward “an unofficial democracy” (Yang G. , 2009, p. 220).

In discussing the Internet in China it is hard to ignore evidence of online government control widely applied in a variety of ways. Although China’s constitution confers citizens with rights to freely and fully express their opinions and ideas, the Chinese government has established a sophisticated and complicated system to control and monitor both traditional and
new media, and this system has been developed and upgraded in recent years to keep up with the rapid growth of the Internet (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). A White Paper (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010), released by the Chinese government in June 2010, tends to provide the public with an explanation of China’s fundamental principles and basic regulations regarding the Internet in China. This White Paper explicitly asserts that Chinese citizens’ freedom of speech expressed on the Internet is guaranteed and protected. However, it points out that “the Internet sovereignty of China should be respected and protected,” and it emphasizes that “all Chinese citizens, foreign citizens, legal persons, and other organizations within the territory of China must obey these provisions” (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010, p. 3).

The Chinese government’s control over the Internet is embodied in online censorship that the Chinese government deploys through a variety of technical methods. According to an empirical study conducted by scholars at Harvard University, the techniques of China’s censorship can be summarized as blocking, reporting, filtering, and redirecting (Zittrain & Edelman, 2003). Among these methods, the Great Firewall particularly stands out as a major instrument used by the Chinese government to block unwanted websites and information. The Great Firewall is a project initiated in 2001 designed to prevent Internet users from accessing certain websites and information by blocking their connection and filtering their contents, and it uses the most advanced technologies of online censorship in the world (Romano, 2009). In addition to these techniques, the Chinese government also invests heavily in human resources and equipment to maintain and operate online censorship mechanisms. David Bandurski, editor of the Hong Kong-based China Media Project, said in 2012 during an interview with CNN that two million people were hired by the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda department to
monitor online content and activities, and a huge amount of money has been invested to maintain their whole online surveillance operation (Hunt & Xu, 2013).

In addition to the government’s systematic censorship, media organizations in China tend to impose self-censorship on their media products to survive or avoid penalties from authorities (Parker, 2013). Both Chinese and foreign media must carefully decide what to write and to report (Tung, 2013). Bloomberg News has been reported to have altered articles that may have included sensitive content that might have upset the Chinese government (Wong, 2013). Denial of visa renewal is also a threat for foreign journalists, because it can be used by the Chinese government to punish foreign journalists’ misbehavior inside China (Wan, 2014). In 2009 Google’s withdrawal from China was based on its refusal to cooperate with the Chinese government in censoring search results (Branigan, 2010).

Censorship has had a tremendous impact on China’s Internet and public discourse regarding its presence in the development of the Internet in China and has also become unavoidable because it is an inseparable part of China’s Internet. Public discourse regarding the Internet’s development in China has several different dimensions. Some scholars have given a great deal of attention to whether or not the Chinese government has used censorship and surveillance to successfully restrict online activism and enhance state control (MacKinnon, 2010; Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Minteh, 2009; Hearns-Branaman, 2009). Studies have found that China’s “networked authoritarianism” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 32) remains effectively in control of online communications, and that the information technology adopted and developed by the Chinese government is dedicated to “strengthening national sovereignty, and enhancement of economic prosperity” (Minteh, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, the Internet may have helped “stabilize and extend the CCP’s authoritarian rule” and may “actually prolong the CCP’s rule” while also
bolstering “regime legitimacy” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 36). Another view regarding the development of the Internet in China is that it has succeeded in helping people participate in public and political events and, as a result, the State’s influence and control on new media is apparently weaker and slower when compared with its control over mainstream media (Xiao, 2011; Liu & Chen, 2012). Viewed in this way, the traditional media outlets, even the most radical and progressive ones, are unable to carry out genuine and broad discussion regarding political events. Another view is that the Internet is a relatively safe place for people to share information, exchange opinions, and call attention to important issues that would otherwise remain invisible (Xiao Q., China Digital Times: Measuring the Political Pulse of Chinese Cyberspace, 2011).

However, it remains unclear just how the virtual lives of hundreds of thousands of individual Chinese have been affected and how they have responded to online censorship. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the impact of the Internet on Chinese society, and researchers have focused on the possible democratization and social change the Internet may have helped bring to China based on their interpretation of the Chinese government’s intentions and policies. Any slight change in the Chinese government’s gestures or controlling attitude toward the Internet has been examined to identify the dynamic between government control and the Internet. Less attention, however, has been given to either Chinese individuals’ online experiences or their emotional and cognitive response to censorship. I believe the Internet’s implications for social change not only depend on the development of technology and on compromises made by the bureaucratic machine, but also lie in individuals’ experiences and are reflected in people’s thoughts and beliefs. This study suggests that Chinese individuals’ awareness and perceptions about censorship may play a crucial role in understanding the impact
of the Internet in China, and how individual Chinese citizens responded to censorship might impact their understanding and confidence in the media. Perhaps, by considering Chinese individuals’ perspectives, we can gain deeper insight into the ongoing social and political change in China.

**Purpose**

The study aims to explore how censorship is applied on China’s Internet and how it impacts Chinese individuals’ online activities. With a case study and 12 in-depth interviews, this study is designed to offer a glimpse of the development of individual rights and government control in present-day China. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to comprehend Chinese individuals’ awareness and perceptions about online censorship and how they respond to censorship in their daily lives. It focuses on people’s experiences and the meaning behind them.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet Censorship in China

The study of China’s online censorship is an important area of Internet research among media and communication scholars. Some research has focused on the development and status quo of the institutional apparatus to describe just how media control is carried out online in China (Shambaugh, 2007; Feng & Guo, 2013). Shambaugh (2007) analyzed structures and processes of the propaganda system in contemporary China, pointing out that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Propaganda Department has remained effective in controlling “virtually every medium concerned with the dissemination of information” since the Maoist era, and “approximately 68 million internet accounts with more than 100 million users, and more than 300 million mobile phone users fall under the purview of the CCPPD” (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 28). Shambaugh (2007) also believed that the effectiveness and power of the Chinese government’s control over media has declined due to rapidly-increasing media commercialization and technologies. Feng and Guo (2013) conducted an empirical study to examine the control mechanisms of China’s Internet censorship, and they identified the specific online blocking mechanisms the Chinese government used, including access control lists, URL blocking, blocking or hijacking domain names, BGP hijacking and blocking keywords (Feng & Guo, 2013). Feng and Guo (2013) found that the Chinese government implements Internet censorship via a hierarchical system, and that control over the Internet is actually carried out through different operators and regions.
Online activism and censorship

On the other hand, many studies tend to probe the consequences of interaction between online activism and cyber-censorship. Leibold (2011) described the struggle between online activism and cyber-censorship as “the good versus evil” (Leibold, 2011, p. 1023). Before co-founding Global Voice Online, Rebecca MacKinnon was a journalist in charge of CNN bureaus in Beijing and subsequently in Tokyo, and is considered a leading expert on Chinese Internet censorship. MacKinnon (2010) gave an analysis of public discourse regarding censorship and online activism in China and noted along with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that “one single, free, and open global Internet is an essential prerequisite for freedom and democracy in the twenty-first century.” However, it doesn’t seem that an impending democratization is happening in China. Chinese “networked authoritarianism” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 32) remains effectively in control of online communications. The dynamics of Internet movements, including political participation, are merely “acting inside the Great Firewall” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 34).

Furthermore, MacKinnon (2010) provides details of the tactics used by the Chinese government to control the Internet. In addition to direct censorship, these tactics include cyber-attacks, device and network controls, domain name controls, localized disconnection and restriction, surveillance, and public outreach. By applying these tactics, the government has successfully diminished people’s ability to raise concerns and dissension on social problems or political reform. The Internet, while expected to empower Chinese people to participate in public affairs, may have helped “stabilize and extend the CCP’s authoritarian rule” and may “actually prolong the CCP’s rule” while also bolstering “regime legitimacy” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 36).

MacKinnon (2010) also warned that online movements against censorship and “digital insurgencies” may have challenged the government’s control over the Internet, but the
government has quickly learned to “maintain power and legitimacy in the Internet Age” (p. 26--34). The government has been engaged in systematic censorship and surveillance and is recognized as a model to be followed by other regimes. Without being “transparent, accountable, and open to reform both through independent courts and the political system” (MacKinnon, 2010, p. 44), it is not likely that Chinese authoritarianism will collapse.

The concern that the Internet may have been used by the Chinese government to influence and shape digital communications has been extensively debated in Western public discourse. Minteh (2008) studied the impact of China’s Internet censorship on both domestic and global economic growth. He argues that the Chinese government adopted information technology to implement censorship of the Internet that was aimed at “strengthening national sovereignty, and enhancement of economic prosperity” (Minteh, 2008, p. 1). As Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) concluded in their study, cyberspace controls designed and applied by the government can be divided into three different generations based on the level of growth and sophistication. The first generation of controls was an Internet filtering system such as China’s “Great Firewall of China.” The second generation aimed at legalizing control over the Internet and developing technical capabilities to deny access to certain websites and resources. Compared to the first two generations, the third generation of controls is more subtle; it attempts to launch propaganda campaigns to compete with or diffuse potential threats. The second- and third-generation controls are most significant because they are interventions that are more invisible and manipulative. Again, Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) concluded that the Chinese government used all these controls to successfully restrict online activism and enhance state control.
Gogging and McLelland (2009) explained that individuals in Australia, the US, or the UK do not have the same Internet experiences as individuals in East Asia because of different online environments and cultures. The Internet should therefore be understood within a context of geographic location or of cultural background. Jesse Owen Hearns-Branaman (2009) has studied culture production and the effects of global capitalism on China based on Marxist, poststructuralist, and postmodern theories. He used Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model to test “the effects that a capitalist base has on news media in the transitioning system of the PRC” and to analyze the Chinese government’s influence on new media. Considering China’s one-party rule, Hearns-Branaman (2009) adopted five filters of Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model, including size, ownership and profit motive, sourcing, advertising, and flak. Despite the help and encouragement of technology and education, “giving the appearance of diversity of opinion while limiting its effects, has apparently yet to emerge in the PRC” (Hearns-Branaman, 2009, p. 136). Although journalism professionalization is growing and resisting the limitations in place because of the government’s ownership structure, “it is clear the CCP is in control and will not let the system expand beyond its grasp for a long time” (Hearns-Branaman, 2009, p. 136).

However, in comparing the differences in ideology between China and the US, Hearns-Branaman’s empirical study (2009) concluded that both China and the US have adopted dominant ideologies of pro-capitalism. He summarized that “the differing political systems of the USA and the PRC do not lead to completely different media systems” (Hearns-Branaman, 2009, p. 119). He noticed that the Chinese government’s attitude toward the Internet is “comparatively open” (Hearns-Branaman, 2009, p. 127). For example, the state committee that regulates the Internet is “made up of scholars as well as officers, unlike most other committees which are just
extensions of the Party” (Zhang L. , 2006, pp. 281-81). Anonymous Internet users have also played an important role with respect to new media in China. Yet Hearns-Branaman noted that the government creates a great amount of flak to manipulate public opinion in order to cover or escape discussion of controversial topics or scandals that may cause a bad image of government. The government was also able to successfully “gauge public opinion about certain topics” (Hearns-Branaman, 2009, p. 133).

While these studies highlight the rise of Internet controls and the limitation of the Internet’s impact on social change, some scholars argue that the Internet has succeeded in helping people participate in public events. As a result, the government has had to adjust its attitude toward Internet control and to change its official behavior. In examining cases distributed online, drawing attention from Internet users and government, Xiao Qiang (2011) pointed out that official Internet control cannot be fully realized and successful at all times. This is not only because communication technologies challenge the existing censorship system, but also because a control gap is created when local officials conceal problematic issues to hide them from central authorities to evade responsibilities. This creates a common goal for Internet users and central government: to observe and monitor local officials together. The traditional media outlets, even the most radical and progressive ones, are not able to carry out genuine and broad discussion and editorials about political events. Except for this type of restriction, the Internet is the perfect place for people to share information, exchange opinions, and call attention to important issues. Xiang Qiang (2011, p. 58) also noticed that online mobilization and protests have significantly influenced Chinese society, as was well demonstrated by the “Tear Down This Firewall!” campaign prior to U.S. President Barack Obama’s visit to China in November 2009. Xiang Qiang (2011, p. 60) believed that “China is becoming an increasingly transparent and
mobile society with more pluralistic values” under the impact of the Internet. Because of this, the Internet is essentially “a catalyst for social and political transformation.”

We can see there is a broad spectrum of views about the impact of online censorship on Chinese society. Traditionally, studies regarding interactions and struggles between online activism and cyber-censorship are assumed as “the good versus evil” (Leibold, 2011, p.1023), and researchers are more concerned about the intention and the role of Chinese leadership. The relationship between censorship and democracy has been researched with “intense speculations” (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, p. 1). Yet we are still missing deep insight into Chinese individuals’ online experiences regarding censorship. How has censorship impacted the online experience of individual Chinese? More specifically, how do individual Chinese view and interpret online information under the control or impact of censorship?

Self-efficacy

Research on people’s online behavior to discover the relationship between Internet use and people’s cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors has included self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is considered to be an important factor influencing Internet users’ online activities and experiences (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009). For the purpose of this study, self-efficacy offers a unique and viable perspective for understanding individual Chinese’s online experiences and their attitudes toward news media.

Bandura has conducted a vast body of research to introduce and develop the concept of self-efficacy (Pajares, 2003). Self-efficacy was defined by Bandura as people’s belief in their own ability to manage and control challenges in a particular situation (Zimmerman, 2000). According to Bandura (1997), people’s perceived self-efficacy determines their thought, feeling, motivation, and behavior. Bandura (1997) believes that a strong sense of self-efficacy plays an
important role in human accomplishments and personal success. A basic premise of self-efficacy is that people with lower self-efficacy are more likely to view a difficult and complicated task as a threat and try to avoid it, while people with strong faith in their own abilities tend to develop commitment and choose to challenge difficult tasks (Bandura, 1997). The level of self-efficacy influences people’s cognitive and behavioral change (Bandura, 1977). Also, the degree of self-efficacy may vary when people are at different stages of life (Marcus, Selby, Niaura, & Rossi, 1992). Bandura (1994) described four major processes that influence how perceived self-efficacy affects individuals’ psychological states, cognition and behavior. They are the cognitive process, the motivational process, the affective process, and the selection process. These four processes demonstrate that peoples’ sense of self-efficacy not only affects the quality of their performance and their motivation to accomplish their goal, but also may also influence their psychological experience in terms of stress and depression and may shape their intentions with respect to choosing the types of activities and environment to which they commit (Bandura, 1994).

From Bandura’s perspective, self-efficacy is formed through four different sources, and the most important of these is various personal experiences of attainment. Bandura (1977) believes that rich experiences of attainment enhance perceived self-efficacy, while repeated failures may lead it to decline. The second source of information is accumulated observations of others and the environment. The experience derived from such observation influences efficacy appraisals though modeling and comparison. People are more likely to increase their self-efficacy by observing the success performed by others similar to themselves, and they tend to doubt their capabilities after seeing failure by such individuals. Models are important tools used in predicting future success in situations where individuals have little personal experience with which to confirm their own capabilities (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). Verbal persuasion is another
source of information that people may partly rely on in discovering their own capabilities. Verbal messages are viewed as encouragement to persuade people to believe they have appropriate capabilities to challenge difficult tasks. However, negative messages may lead people to believe that they are incompetent and thus unable to achieve a desired goal. Persuasion messages work better with people with already strong beliefs in their own capabilities. The physiological state is the fourth source of information that people may use to determine their self-efficacy. The body’s reactions, such as stress and tension, work as indicators to reflect a level of vulnerability in a difficult situation. People with high psychological and emotional arousal tend to have low expectations of success. By the same token, positive mood and self-control of emotions can contribute to the high expectation of successful performance.

Self-efficacy beliefs have been studied by scholars from various fields. Much of the prior work on self-efficacy involves psychological problems, educational research, and contemporary motivation research (Pajares, 1999). In addition, self-efficacy has often been studied as it relates to media use. Hofstetter, Zuniga, and Dozier (2001) provide evidence of the relevance of media self-efficacy for media research by measuring variables such as media use, exposure, intellectual stimulation, credibility, political efficacy, and participation. They found that self-efficacy is associated with people’s media use, and that people with high media self-efficacy are more likely to use media for information seeking and communication than those with low media self-efficacy (Hofstetter, Zuniga, & Dozier, 2001). A study conducted by Agha (2003) points out that exposure to media can also lead to a higher degree of personal self-efficacy. People exposed to branded advertising messages are more likely to have greater self-efficacy and accept positive suggestions (Agha, 2003).
Based on Bandura’s definition of self-efficacy, some scholars have adapted their self-efficacy approaches to new media in the new context of computing technology. Some studies have explored individual reactions to computers and the Internet (Compeau, Higgins, & Huff, 1999). A high level of self-efficacy, for example, may contribute to people’s confidence in their ability to control and operate a computer (Compeau, Higgins, & Huff, 1999). Self-efficacy is associated not only with people’s computer skills, but it also may be a crucial variable affecting game players’ performance and enjoyment (Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). Eastin and LaRose (2000) recognize that the relationship between self-efficacy and computer use is significant, but Internet self-efficacy differs from computer self-efficacy because using the Internet requires a set of skills beyond those of basic personal computer use. Also, because prior studies of the relationship between self-efficacy and computer use have focused on operational performance, more research is needed to gain understanding of the psychological impact of Internet trends such as the digital divide (Eastin and LaRose, 2000).

Using the concept of self-efficacy, media studies usually rely on quantitative methods to measure relevant variables to predict possible behavioral changes. Surveying is a primary method used to examine the relationships between variables and self-efficacy (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002; Pinkleton, Austin, Zhou, Willoghby, & Reiser, 2012). Scholars have developed different scales to measure Internet self-efficacy and to examine the links between learning skills and technologies (Sherer, et al., 1982; Bandura, 2006). A case study was conducted in Taiwan to explore middle-aged and older adults’ Internet self-efficacy (Lin, Liang, Yang, & Tsai, 2013). The study discovered five sources in addition to the four classic sources identified by Bandura (1977). These five sources were analyzed and derived through interview data, and they were proven influential with respect to older people’s online performance. However, few qualitative
studies have been completed to explain and investigate the role that these sources of self-efficacy play with respect to people’s online behavior.

This study aims to use qualitative methods to understand whether online censorship in China has influenced Chinese individuals’ beliefs and behavior toward media, including the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Chinese individuals’ online experience should be taken into account in studying social and political changes caused by the Internet. Individuals emotionally and psychologically interacting with China’s censorship can provide authentic and personal perspectives about censorship and the Internet. In addition to examining the power of technology and the political system, to explore the consequences of technology it is crucially important to look into individual experiences. This study seeks to understand the possible social and political change in current China associated with the Internet by exploring people’s personal experiences, including sources of information used to develop self-efficacy about media.

Research Questions

This study addressed three overarching questions to ascertain the perceptions of individual Chinese with regard to the influence of censorship on their online activities and their attitudes toward media:

RQ1: How did the Chinese government censor the media during and after the Wukan Protests?

RQ2: What meaning does censorship hold for individual Chinese?

RQ3: How does censorship impact Chinese individuals’ perceptions and beliefs with regard to media?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Methods

The purpose of qualitative research in this study is to understand natural settings and meanings in society by analyzing both visual and verbal data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Observation and words play significant roles in qualitative studies because they allow investigators to learn closely from reality, to explore the implications of everyday experience, and to interpret human behavior for a deeper understanding of our world. This study aims to explore the complex interactions between the Internet and individual rights in China. While the dynamic of this interaction is difficult to measure, it is growing and evolving in an unprecedented way with many new characteristics, leading to interesting and sometimes unexpected outcomes. A qualitative study was chosen because its features and methods perfectly match this dynamic. The methods used in a qualitative study to collect, analyze, and interpret evidence can lead researchers to grasp the essential meaning of people’s experiences (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

This study uses the qualitative case-study method and interviews to address the research questions. The case-study method is considered by Wimmer and Dominick (2011) to be a good approach to “gather descriptive and explanatory data” (p.141). It can take several forms and use a variety of techniques. Soy (1997) pointed out “a key strength of the case-study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data-gathering process (Soy, 1997, para.10). Marriam (1998) outlines four important characteristics of case-study research: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. Qualitative researchers have also relied on
interviewing to gather information directly. As an important method of academic research, interviewing has been used to understand people’s social, economic, and cultural conditions for thousands of years (Brennen, 2013).

**Research Design**

The objective of this study was to utilize case-study and interviewing techniques to explore Chinese people’s online experience with censorship. The research was designed to proceed in three steps. First, sources on the Internet of archival data related to the Wukan Protests were identified, selected, and analyzed to comprehend the strategies used in Chinese online censorship. Second, interviews about Chinese individuals’ online experience were conducted and the findings were interpreted. Finally, the results of the case study and interviews were synthesized to address the research questions.

**Case Study**

The study investigated the case involving strategies adopted by the Chinese government to censor news reports about the Wukan Protests. It used as evidence the news reports from online archived data stored on both Chinese and international media. Several steps were taken to collect and organize the large amount of information about this case. The first step was to define the sources, the websites from which the data was collected. These websites were carefully selected and categorized into four different categories: Chinese official media, Chinese mainstream media, Chinese social media, and international media. All these four types of websites had been more or less censored during the period of the Wukan Protests. Chinese media were directly affected in their news reports by governmental control of the Internet, and international media also experienced blockage or criticism by the Chinese government during that specific period.
As a second step, I began collecting data regarding the particular event I was studying through news, videos, comments, and blogs that were archived online. The relevant data were carefully copied and stored on my personal computer, and I used an open-coding method to define and organize the data (Khandkar, 2014). Open-coding involves starting with an inductive coding system with no predefined categories. A spreadsheet was designed as an index to organize and categorize these data. The data collection activity is summarized in Table 1 that was designed based on a method proposed by Toepfl (Toepfl, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel of Distribution</th>
<th>Chinese Official Media</th>
<th>Chinese Mainstream Media</th>
<th>Chinese Social Media</th>
<th>International Mainstream Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Media Outlets</td>
<td>People's Daily Xinhuanet</td>
<td>sina ifeng wangyi</td>
<td>Weibo Tianya</td>
<td>BBC NY Times Wall Street Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards Chinese government</td>
<td>Unconditional support</td>
<td>Support but selectively critical</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Highly critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Marginal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The four sources of data collection (based on Toepfl, 2011, p. 1306)

I then began the process of reviewing and digesting the data. I kept reminding myself to be aware of both my own bias and possible biases within the sources while I was reviewing the data, since my goal was to present a balanced picture in presenting the evidence collected.

The next step was analyzing the data to address the research questions. The themes and patterns underlying the case emerged during this step, and ideas about just how to present these data in a qualitative framework became clear. The data were organized and analyzed using the four categories shown in Table 1. The findings were generated along with the data analysis, and the strategies used by the Chinese government to censor the media were examined and described in a narrative pattern.
Interviews

This study involved 12 semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 18 and 50 minutes. The 12 Participants (5 female, and 7 male) were Chinese graduate students at a large Midwestern university in the US, and they were selected from 8 different departments. The participants in this study grew up in different Chinese regions and they studied at different colleges. Chinese graduate students were chosen as the participants because they had completed undergraduate study in China, had accumulated Internet experience in China, and could speak English fluently to clearly present their own understanding of China’s censorship. The research site, Iowa State University, is an international university that enrolled more than 33,000 students in 2013. China sent more students to this university than any other country; of 3,510 international students enrolled in 2012, more than half, 1,917, came from China (VanDerZanden, 2013). Because the topic of the research was related to personal experiences and perceptions about a controversial political instrument, censorship, all participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential and anonymous to avoid any potential risk of exposure. Each participant in this study has therefore been identified using only a participant number. As further protection, their demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, hometown, and year of arrival in the United States, have not been disclosed.

The interviews were individually conducted over a three-week interval. Each interview started with general questions regarding participants’ experience with Internet use in China, including when they started using it and the nature of their online activities. Then participants were asked about their awareness and perceptions of possible online censorship invoked by the Chinese government. They were also asked whether they had “climbed the wall” to reach blocked websites and information. If participants had experiences of climbing the wall, they
were asked to describe how they learned to do it and what motivated them. They were then asked questions about their trust in media, their understanding of the truth delivered by media, and their attitudes in terms of different genres of media. The last section of each interview asked participants whether they had heard about the Wukan Protests and what they knew about that situation. The participants were then asked whether they would access the Internet for help if they were in the same situation as that of the Wukan villagers or needing public support and help in a similarly difficult situation. If participants indicated that they would be likely to access the Internet for such help, they were asked to provide details about how they would do so and the media they would be most likely to approach for such help.

Snowball sampling was used in this study to acquire participants and collect interview data (Goodman, 1961). I started recruitment by approaching a first-year Chinese graduate student, a classmate’s friend to whom I had talked once before. I described my study and then asked if she would agree to have an interview with me. She agreed and we arranged to meet and conduct the interview the next day. After we finished the interview, I asked if she could recommend for participation any of her friends who met the conditions of the study and were willing to talk to me about their experience with Internet use in China. She forwarded me the contact information for two of her friends, and after we exchanged texts on the phone they both agreed to participate in the study. Later, one of her two friends recommended another friend as well, and the process continued. The final result of this method was that 12 eligible Chinese graduate students accepted interview requests. Each of them showed up for the scheduled meeting, and agreed to the terms of the Consent Form before beginning the interview.

I recorded all interviews using my smartphone and listened to each recording several times. I transcribed each interview within a week after it was conducted and printed out verbatim
transcripts for reviewing and analyzing. While reviewing each transcription, I made notes with respect to common points, highlighted emotional expressions and other significant statements, and identified emerging themes. I designed an Excel spreadsheet to divide the interview data into the categories of demographic information, experience of Internet use and censorship, and perception of different spheres of media. I began coding the interviews at the same time I was transcribing and organizing the interview data, and I analyzed the data by using open and closed coding processes to identify reliable findings (Khandkar, 2014). The major themes emerged after the coding process was completed.

**Preliminary Study**

A preliminary study was conducted in Fall 2013 as a project in a qualitative methods course I took to prepare for this thesis research. For that project I interviewed one international graduate student from China about his experience in Internet use and his awareness of censorship in China. The interview was a semi-structured interview lasting 35 minutes, and the interviewee seriously answered each question and provided his perceptions and understanding of the Internet in China. Through this preliminary study I practiced my interview skills, was able to learn more about the research method, and gained insight into how to be a qualitative researcher. In addition, after the preliminary study I realized that participants might not have been aware of the Wukan Protests, because the news reporting of the event had been censored in China because it was politically sensitive. I then revisited the interview questions and decided to focus on participants’ online experiences with censorship in broader terms than only their perceptions of the news reporting of the Wukan Protests. Based on this preliminary study, I changed some interview questions and modified the research questions to improve the method to be used in the study.
CHAPTER 4
CASE STUDY

Wukan is a village in South-East China with a population of approximately 12,000 (Lu, 2012). This village, barely visible on a map, has become famous worldwide because of protests that started in September 2011 (Lu, 2012). These protests, initially focused on anti-corruption, evolved into a struggle for free elections. Initially, villagers launched sit-in protests against illegal land grabs by the local government. After five villagers who led and participated in the organization of protests were detained, and one of them, Xue Jinbo, died in detention on December 11, 2011, the protests escalated into an uprising. Thousands of villagers gathered to mourn Xue Jinbo, forced all local officials and police out of the village, and even blockaded all roads to prevent officials from re-entering. They demanded direct dialogue with the central government and announced that the protests would not end until the central government took charge of an investigation into the cause of death of the protester. Three young villagers, including Zhang Jianxing and Ji Jiang, set up a studio to document the whole event through pictures, videos, and reports (Yang & Zhang, 2013; Zhang J., 2011; Wang C., 2013). Because of the tight governmental control, there was limited and unbalanced media coverage within China regarding the ongoing Wukan protests (Yang & Zhang, 2013). However, Zhang Jianxing and Ji Jiang released regular microblogged videos and reports to update readers about the situation in Wukan, and these reports drew significant attention, both domestically and internationally (Wang C., 2013).

On December 20, 2011, representatives on behalf of the Guang Dong provincial government were sent to the village to negotiate with the protesters, and this became a turning
point for the whole event. The provincial government accepted the requests made by villagers by recognizing the elected representatives of Wukan as well as the Interim Council of Wukan, by promising the release of detained villagers, and by investigating the cause of death of Xue Jinbo. In response, the villagers agreed to stop the protests and remove roadblocks to restore trust in government. Two days later hundreds of villagers welcomed another round of talks between senior officials and the elected representatives of Wukan; two detainees were released, and the protests ended peacefully. On December 21, the protests formally ended as senior provincial officials flew to the village and offered concessions to appease the protesters. On December 22, the state-run media, People’s Daily, published an editorial: “What Does 'Wukan's Turn' Mean for Us?” (People's Daily, 2011).” The editorial emphasized the success of talks between village representatives and senior officials, and praised senior provincial officials for understanding people’s appeals and for reaching a peaceful settlement with the local citizens (People’s Daily, 2011). This editorial signified that the Chinese government had relaxed its control over the media with regard to news reporting about the Wukan Protests. Online discussions regarding this event flared up after December 21, 2011, the day when the villagers agreed to end the protests and cooperate with the Chinese government.

The vice minister of the Department of Central Civil Affairs, Jiang Li, defined the Wukan Protests as a typical case of rural grassroots democracy (Wang Y., 2013). He indicated that, as a unique political event, the Wukan Protests not only had drawn a great deal of attention from all the different spheres of both domestic and international mainstream media, but also reflected well on the strategies that the Chinese government had adopted to control news reporting and online discussion (BBC, 2011). Table 1 presents an overview of news media involved in the reporting of the Wukan Protests. I have grouped these media into four categories.
The first category includes national official media and local official media. There is no significant difference in the ideological and political tone between the national official media and local official media because the national official media are responsible for conveying the ideas and intentions of the central government (People's Daily, 2014). The editorials published in the People’s Daily play an important role in delivering the national leaders’ opinion and attitude toward particular events. The Daily is expected to set the tone for other Chinese media when reporting on public affairs and is considered a political indicator in China.

The most visited portals of mainstream media in China include Sina.com.cn, ifeng.com and 163.com (Alexa, 2014). Founded in 1997, Sina.com is owned by Sina Corp., a public company listed on the NASDAQ (sina, 2014). The parent company of 163.com, NetEase Corp., is also a public company listed on the NASDAQ, and was also founded in 1997 (NetEase, 2014). These two websites share similar characteristics; they both offer international, national, and regional news by targeting a variety of groups of Chinese people based on their business and financial interests. Phoenix Television owns ifeng.com, which has its headquarters in Hong Kong. Although Phoenix Television is a public company listed in Hong Kong, its founder and current chairman, Liu Changle, who worked for China National Radio in the 1980s, is well-known for having a close relationship with Beijing and for keeping silent on the most sensitive events (Boyd-Barrett & Xie, 2008). These three websites have one thing in common when reporting on the Wukan Protests: the official press release was their major source of news, and there were no reports from sources from within the international media. Although all three websites are owned by non-government media companies, they tend to maintain an ideological tone identical to that of the official media.
The social network websites I selected for the case study are Tianya Club and Sina Weibo. Tianya Club differs from Chinese official and mainstream media in many respects in offering online services, including forum, microblog, and blog, and it is considered a popular online community not only by Chinese netizens, but also by some Chinese officials who use Tianya to read about current affairs and sometimes even join public discussion to solicit advice and opinions through it (Xiao L. , 2014). The reason that Tianya Club was selected to represent Chinese social media is because I found that the posts and comments made by ordinary and anonymous Internet users about the Wukan Protests were not removed from it. At the time of this research study, I searched Sina Weibo but couldn’t find much information about the Wukan Protests; this may be due to the unique features regarding privacy and internal communication on that social network. Tianya Club enjoys a reputation for tolerating sharp criticism toward the government, and it is famous for its information search that was popular among Chinese Internet users for tracing and exposing corrupt officials and celebrities. As of May 2014, the number of registered users on Tianya had reached more than 90 million (Tianya, 2014). Founded in 1999, Tianya Club has become one of the most visited websites in contemporary China (Alexa, 2014).

The fourth category, international media, was comprised of the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and BBC. These three media outlets collectively exerted a great deal of effort in reporting on the Wukan Protests (Wang C. , 2013). For example, during one single day, December 15, 2011, there were 15 reports on the BBC website about the Wukan Protests (BBC, 2011). These reports, including videos and articles, emphasized the tension between the Chinese government and the protesters. Some of those reports included in-depth interviews with villagers who even dared to provide reporters with their real names, offering audiences a different perspective about the protests in comparison to that of both official and mainstream Chinese
media. Also, because these international media outlets are free of Chinese governmental control, they may have adopted and exhibited different communication patterns in reporting this event.

The Wukan case illustrates several techniques and strategies that the Chinese government used to control the media. Studying this case helps us understand the practical applications of Chinese online censorship. The following section discusses the Chinese government’s approach to censoring four different media entities and presents my perspectives on the Internet's role in promoting political change in China.

**Findings**

The Chinese government has developed a variety of tactics for censoring online content to strengthen its political control and national sovereignty. A great deal of effort has been exercised to ensure that online movements stay under control (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). The techniques and strategies applied by the Chinese government to censor the media both during and after the Wukan Protests vary among different targets, but they have significantly influenced the style and tone of reporting in the Chinese and international news media.

**Official Media**

According to collected online archival data, it was actually the Chinese local official media who initially reported the Wukan Protests. The earliest report about the event I found was issued by a provincial news media, Yangcheng Evening News, and published on September 21, 2011. There was also a considerable amount of reporting about the Wukan Protests on both Chinese national and local media after the onset of the event. However, the characteristics and style of these reports show that the Chinese official media merely constitute part of the propaganda machine of the Chinese government that aims to convey the views of the government instead of providing genuine and comprehensive reporting.
Official media reports regarding the Wukan Protests mainly focus on the role of local officials leading the Wukan Village, and the tone of the reports tends to criticize and blame the villagers for what happened, especially during the early stages of the event. The earliest report about the event in the Yangcheng Evening News was published with the title *Few Villagers of Wukan in Lufeng mobbing and intentionally destroying public property*. The report condemned villagers' behavior but praised officials for properly executing their duties (Wang & Lu, 2011). These reports seemed to deliver the Chinese government’s views and intentions, but rarely focused on villagers’ concerns and demands. A significant manifestation was that there were almost no positive descriptions or interviews regarding the Wukan villagers who initiated or later joined the protests. It appears that the official reports only speak with the one voice allowed by censorship.

Another significant trait of the official reports is the domination of text in reporting the Wukan Protests. It seems that the Chinese official media were not eager to adopt multimedia when reporting a sensitive political event like the Wukan Protests. None of the 39 reports I collected from official media includes pictures or videos about the event, and the functions of sharing and forwarding were also missing. In contrast, international news, entertainment news, and sports news on official media usually offer multimedia reports with pictures and on-site reports or video, and options of sharing and forwarding are provided at the end of these reports.

These findings suggest that the Chinese official media carry out the official government line with positive descriptions of the local officials but much less attention to villagers. It appears that the censorship simplified and narrowed the reporting methods and may have caused the media products to appear outdated in the rapidly developing digital world.
Chinese mainstream media

Blocking and filtering were the key techniques applied to the news content of the Chinese mainstream media regarding the Wukan Protests. The Chinese words for “Wukan” became one of the sensitive terms that users were prohibited from searching online in 2011 (Yang Y., 2011). The users of Sina Weibo claimed that “Wukan” had become a banned keyword in the Weibo search engine as well (BBC, 2011). There was limited media coverage in the Chinese mainstream media in the period between October and November in 2011 when the Wukan protests were ongoing. I didn’t find any published reports about the Wukan Protests in October 2011. From the total of 155 reports in my archival data, only two were published in November, and one of them was posted on an Internet forum, Tianya.cn, while the other was published on the website of a mainstream media organization, Sina.com.cn.

The Chinese mainstream media share one thing in common with official media: They both rarely used pictures or videos in the reporting of the Wukan Protests; the reports were dominated by text. I collected 29 reports by mainstream media about the Wukan Protests; of these, only two reports from iphone.com included pictures to aid audiences in understanding the event. In the first picture, published on November 22, 2011, villagers sat calmly in orderly protest and there were no aggressive scenes of protest or demonstration. The second picture, published on December 30, showed an empty square in front of a local government building, indicating that the villagers had gone away and the protests had ended peacefully. There was no live coverage of the event focusing on villagers. The villagers’ voices in general were muted on Chinese mainstream media. The vast majority of the 29 reports on mainstream media are forwarded messages from official media, so the format, style, and tone are almost as the same as in those from official media. This indicates that the Chinese mainstream media may have
actively participated with the Chinese government to self-censor their political reports in order to be consistent with the official media.

This suggests that the Chinese government successfully controls the domestic mainstream media through techniques such as blocking and filtering. It also seems feasible that those news organizations engaged in self-censorship. As a result, the mainstream media can be regarded as part of the Chinese government’s propaganda machine where political coverage is concerned.

**Chinese Social Media**

Wukan became one of the blocked keywords on Weibo in December 2011 (BBC, 2011). The results of a search on Weibo produced a message stating, “Wukan search results are not displayed according to relevant laws, regulations and policies” (Martin, 2011), and even the updates and reports about the protests posted by the Wukan villagers were quickly removed from Weibo (BBC, 2011). To dodge the censorship, Chinese Weibo users used the designation WK to refer to Wukan in online discussion (BBC, 2011).

The Chinese government’s tight control over the media coverage of the Wukan Protests is best illustrated by Tianya.cn, one of the most visited Internet forums in China. The 7 articles I collected on Tianya.cn from November through December 2011 were all posted by anonymous Internet users. Among these 7 articles, the earliest was published on November 26, and included a red alert at the end of article stating that comments are not allowed. The remaining 6 articles were all dated in December; and comments were prohibited on three of them. In contrast, the article posted on December 31, after the whole event had ended peacefully, had 990 comments after the government quietly abandoned control over the news reports about the Wukan Protests.

There is no doubt that the Chinese government has invested a great amount of effort and resources to develop various methods of social media censorship, including Weibo (Reuters,
Since both Weibo and Tianya are included in government monitoring and censorship, it may come as no surprise that those websites have no information posted about the protests as the events unfolded. There was, especially on Weibo, almost no historical discussion or postings about Wukan during that time. The records archived were dated after 2011 when the protests had ended and the control over media was removed. It appears that blocking and filtering are the primary techniques the Chinese government applied to control the social media during the time of the protests.

**International Mainstream Media**

On December 19, Zheng Yanxiong, the mayor of Shanwei City, the higher level of administration that has oversight over Wukan Village, made a speech at a meeting with local officials and some representatives from Wukan Village (Zheng, 2014). His speech was unexpectedly released online, and it generated a nationwide discussion because he was straightforward and honest in expressing his view of the incident. In his speech, the mayor fiercely criticized the role that the international media played during the event, a role considered to have encouraged and pushed the villagers to stand up against the Chinese government. He believed that the Wukan Protests were an internal affair similar to quarrels happening among families, and that to receive calls for justice from the bad and rotten international media would not help solve the issues (Zheng, 2014). What Zheng Yanxiong said represents Chinese officials’ deep distrust toward the international media. This may explain the emergence of the Great Firewall, one arm of the government’s online censorship that has been in operation since 1998. This firewall has been successful in blocking a number of foreign websites that are not welcomed by the Chinese government in terms of their political coverage.
After the protests were made public on the microblog, more than 80 international media outlets reported on them (Zhang J., 2012). The BBC, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* all did follow-up coverage on this event. The villagers updated their status to overseas audiences by uploading a large number of videos to YouTube. Foreign journalists visited the village and issued a large number of reports describing the event. With widespread and continuous international coverage, the Wukan events that started as a local protest developed into an internationally well-known event, and challenged the central government’s ability to relieve the growing tension between individuals and local officials.

Although much effort had been made to report the Wukan Protests, the websites of the New York Times, BBC and Wall Street Journal were not completely accessible in mainland China because of censorship. According to greatfire.org, a non-profit organization focusing on monitoring China’s censorship, the website of the New York Times had been blocked within China since March 2011. Although the online versions of BBC and WSJ are not completely blocked in China, they both have been banned several times by the Chinese government because of their reporting of sensitive or taboo political topics about China. BBC along with other international media became inaccessible in December 2010 in advance of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony (BBC, 2010), and access to the Wall Street Journal’s Chinese and English sites had been blocked within mainland China for a few months because the Chinese government intended to control the explosive growth of foreign media (Chu & Launder, 2013). In general, accessing foreign news sites in China tends to be slower than loading domestic sites because the censorship activity systematically slows down the traffic from networks outside China (Khazan, 2012).

In contrast to the official and mainstream media, the international media used multimedia extensively to cover the Wukan events. Nearly every online report by international media
included photos, and some of them had videos. The photos were mainly focused on the protesters, with the Chinese officials barely appearing. In the videos the protesters explained their intentions and demands with strong emotional expression, including anger and excitement.

To summarize, domestic Chinese media closely followed the government line and rarely presented the perspective of the protesters themselves. In contrast, international media focused on the protesters and often included photos and videos of the events. The coverage as a whole conforms to the assertion that there is widespread and effective censorship on China’s Internet.
CHAPTER 5

INTERVIEWS

Findings

Because news reporting of the Wukan Protests was rare because of online censorship of politically-sensitive events in China, there was little awareness of the event by the study’s participants. The study interviews focused on participants’ experiences with China’s online censorship and their perceptions of news media rather than their understanding of the news reporting of the Wukan Protests. The interviews showed that all participants were Internet users during their time in China. The majority of them, 10 of 12, started using the Internet before high school; the remaining two began using the Internet in high school or in their first year of college. Although the participants grew up in different regions and studied at different colleges, they shared many commonalities in terms of Internet use and experience of censorship.

The participants all seemed initially attracted to the Internet by its social media and online games. Seven of them mentioned games and 4 of them mentioned QQ and chat rooms when asked about their first experience with the Internet. All participants were aware of Chinese censorship. They all experienced a variety of forms of control and censorship applied to the Internet. The majority of participants, 11 of 12, had experiences of climbing the firewall to visit blocked foreign websites when they were in China. Neither participants nor their friends have been caught or punished for climbing the wall.

The 12 in-depth interviews demonstrated three dominant themes about people’s awareness and perceptions of Internet censorship in China: ubiquitous and influential censorship,
suspicions about media’s credibility, and critically-selected news sources used to find the truth.
Each of the themes is described in detail in the following section.

“Big Brother” always watching over my shoulder - Ubiquitous and effective censorship

The study showed that censorship seemed unavoidable on China’s Internet, with all participants experiencing a variety of forms of censorship and Internet control. The forms of censorship and government control were manifested in the study as shown in Table 1. As participant 3 pointed out, his writing was once deleted by censorship only because it happened to have the number 64, the day of the Tiananmen Square Incident, considered to be a taboo topic by the Chinese government. Participant 11 said she had a lot of experience in being censored and blocked. The Twitter account set up when she was an exchange student overseas could not be accessed after she came back to China; the website Fan Fou, on which she had an account, was blocked; and a website Bu Lao Ge, on which she had written blogs, was also shut down for unknown reasons. She also mentioned that another of her favorite websites, Niu Bo Wang, popular among Chinese intellectuals for blogging and exchanging ideas, was both blocked and unblocked several times. When asked how she felt during the blocking, she said:

I just, I just feel very disappointed because I have saved some messages there. I think Bu Lao Ge has also been blocked for some time. I just feel like I have some written some blogs on it, and I didn't save it on my computer, and since it is, the website crashed, and I have no access to these information anymore.

An analysis of the interviews indicated that the censorship not only disturbs people’s online political activities, it also affects participants’ behaviors related to entertainment and academic research. Several participants were motivated to climb the wall by Facebook and
YouTube, and some participants mentioned that they climbed the wall to use Google to search for academic information.

Censorship prevents participants from being able to search, publish, communicate and comment on the Internet by blocking, deleting, and censoring online information. None of the participants mentioned there had been any notification or written warning received regarding their online misconduct. The censorship appears ubiquitous but was done quietly and mechanically. It seems that the consequences of posting sensitive remarks online are absent for individual participants. Participant 6 provided an explanation about this absence of consequences:

I need to say that sometimes you would think it is government control behavior, but most of that or at least, I think, half of that, is not directly done by the government. They are the behavior of the enterprise that provide you that platform. Sometimes they're doing the self-censorship. Not always really conducted by the government. Sometimes they just don’t want to get trouble. They just thought the government won't allow it. Or not happy they're talking on their platform, so they did many self-censorship there.

But if you allow those kind of discussion, then you will find maybe nothing will happen from the government once you have real professional control. Different media network, different platform, they have their own character. Some one more open. Some of them are more conservative. I just mean actually not every censorship there is conducted by government.
The most frequent word that participants used to describe their feelings about censorship is *inconvenient*, although some used strong emotional words to express their feelings, such as “hate,” “angry,” “afraid,” and “very disappointed.” Generally the censorship generated unpleasant and troublesome feelings in the participants. Participant 2 described her feeling below:

…but if you are in China, and you try to search certain things, even it's just, let's see, even it's just a chemistry article, it's an academic article about chemistry, you are like searching that, over 4 or 5 times you search on google, the website would be blocked, and, I mean, the entire google website would be blocked, if you refresh the webpage, you only see the whole page of google, with g-o-o-g-l-e, but it can't help you do any other google service on that. People hate we all know that, we all hate, but we, we got nothing to do with it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Climbed Firewall</th>
<th>Reason of Climbing Firewall</th>
<th>Experiences of censorship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>YouTube, watch videos, political news</td>
<td>Yes, a lot, especially for searching information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>American TV shows</td>
<td>Writing included 64 was deleted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Gmail acct not accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Gmail, google</td>
<td>Yes, photos deleted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>American TV shows</td>
<td>Yes, writings were deleted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Google</td>
<td>Yes, names of political leaders not provided by search engine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>classmates and friends do</td>
<td>Google not accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>Yes, names of political leaders not provided by search engine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>classmates and friends do</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>For music</td>
<td>Yes, a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>classmates and friends do</td>
<td>Yes, google not accessible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the other hand, the majority of participants claimed that they had climbed the wall to reach a blocked website or information, and all participants told me that some or all of their friends had also done that. The motivations for climbing the wall vary, and the methods they learned and used to climb the wall also differed in terms of source and techniques. Interestingly, two participants specifically pointed out that they learned it through Baidu by searching online. Baidu, the leading Internet search engine in China that has always actively cooperated with Chinese government censorship (Woo, 2007), provides information about how to climb the wall. Another surprising finding is that participant 1 even learned to do this in one of the classes in the first year of her undergraduate study. The instructor showed how to connect to YouTube, and he selected one video about the Tiananmen Square Incident to reveal and explain that important but covered-up history of that event to students in the class. When asked whether they or their friends had been caught or punished because of climbing the wall, participants all said that, to their knowledge, no one has been arrested or punished because of it. It seems the consequence of climbing the wall is also enforced absence, which may indicate that the action of simply climbing the wall might not be the main object of control.

Besides climbing the wall, participants illustrated that they created their own strategies for discussing politics online without being detected by censorship. Participant 2 said, “People have a lot ways to discuss that actually.” For instance, soon after certain sensitive words become unavailable or forbidden online, nicknames or shortened names could be immediately created to refer to the forbidden ones, and these new names can be accepted and promoted overnight, and even adopted by mainstream media after becoming well-known on the Internet.
Participant 6 had a strong passion for politics, and he admitted that he talks about politics online every day. When asked whether he feels safe discussing politics online in China, he said that the way he uses the Internet to talk about politics can dodge censorship:

I don't need to use a way the government don't like. I really don't need. Maybe some people really needs to say something the government don't like you to say. I really don't think I have this experience. I discuss about the politics on the Internet every day. I don't think it's a problem of mine. The parents usually, they remind me that maybe you needs to keep some caution about, especially when you are in America. I know what I'm saying. I know what I'm doing. I don't do the things, obey the law, or really write some political ... social affairs or something. I don't do it. I really don't think I need to do that. Just a discussion. It's OK.

However, the wall and the censorship still acted as a threat or deterred some participants to some extent. Participant 8 described how she was afraid of government control while climbing the wall:

I can't remember, because it's few times, just, I was really, afraid, I know, when I used this kind of software, and, ohm, I mean, how to say, search website out of country, I know the government can see that, they have the software.

These expressions made by participants indicate how censorship and government can affect participants’ lives in the virtual world. It seems censorship not only restricted and limited participants’ online behavior, but it also impacted them emotionally and psychologically.
Suspicious in Media

As the interviews moved forward, participants were asked how they perceive the trustworthiness of media. They were asked to compare the four different spheres of media, Chinese official media, Chinese mainstream media, Chinese social media and international mainstream media. Participants described their experience with each sphere of media, and how they value the trustworthiness of each in terms of political news and how the media impact their personal political views. Even more specifically, participants were asked how they probe for the truth if the media are not reliable. The thematic finding from this part of the interviews was that all participants carry a deep distrust in the media, regardless of type.

Chinese Official Media

Overall, the majority participants did not rely on Chinese official media for political information either before or after they came to the United States. Eight participants said they do not visit official websites at all, and 3 participants occasionally use them for high-quality photos and details of government policies. Only one, participant 4, said he prefers to use Chinese official media such as People’s Daily and Xinhua Net for news every day. However, when asked whether he trusts the political news reported by People’s Daily or Xinhua Net, he firmly answered no, and he further explained:

Because it is, it is, there are a lot of rich people powerful people there, if they want you to know something, you know, if they do not want you to know something, never.
Participant 2 sometimes uses the information on official sites to gain knowledge of government policies, but she would not go to them to understand the dynamics of ongoing political or social issues. She explained why:

Official website, I won't go there, because you won't get anything from there, (laugh), so you, you won't go there because you know, but that doesn't mean there is no any information, or gesture, that doesn't mean you cannot find any gesture about the government from those official websites, so I would try to go there to see how, to, to, right now how the government, how the gesture of government looks like, to these stage.

For participants who do not visit official news websites at all, they used words such as “boring,” “not interesting,” “nothing new,” and “old” to describe the official sites. Participant 5 simply said that he “don’t believe the news there.” To them, the official news websites carry a negative image and have little value in terms of online entertainment and news credibility.

**Chinese Mainstream Media**

Most participants visit Chinese mainstream media on a daily basis. The most frequently visited websites are Sina (7 of 12), Wangyi (4 of 12), and ifeng (3 of 12). However, it seems there is no strong bond or close connection formed between participants and Chinese mainstream media. Participant 7 explained why he chooses Wangyi to view news online:

Ohm, because Wangyi provides, firstly the websites interface is good, also it's better than Sina, also sohu, because I am getting used to that interface, you know every time I open up the webpage, I can without thinking, I can find any
information and where to find sports, entertainment, and technology things, so because i am getting used to it, so most of time, I use Wangyi.

Participant 7 further shared how he distrusts the news and information posted on Wangyi, though he visits it every day:

Yes, if, if you put time thinking about it, I mean, if the website put some information today, tomorrow they put some information contradictory. (Laugh). I mean, because it's a large website, so they are different editors and writers, I mean, they have different point of views, I mean, not all of them are professional, so, I don't, I don't trust the information directly, I need to wait sometimes, to see if the information is true. In fact we have seen a lot of times that information is untrue, or at least the writers do not know the whole image of the scene, so he, maybe the writer self is misled.

Compared to official news websites, a common premise expressed by participants is that there are no particular negative critiques or comments directed toward Chinese mainstream media; participants simply do not have trust in any media. The Chinese mainstream media are merely a news platform that has not successfully built a positive image to meet participants’ expectations of reliable and trusted media. Participant 11, who relied on Sohu for news every day, spoke about how he would not trust any Internet media:

For me, I think that I have my knowledge and I will judge these things based on my knowledge and the background and the knowledge. I say I will not trust a thing based on its source. I think this question is, for me, that I don’t trust any news.
Chinese Social Media

Participants’ distrust in the media was also reflected in their perceptions about Chinese social media. Although some participants believe that political news on social media were updated in faster and timelier fashion, it still seems that it’s hard for participants to believe in the objectivity of social media when it is dealing with political and social issues. Participant 3 considers Weibo, one of the current leading social networks in China, as his “first source of information, especially for political, some hot areas.” But he added that he would go to other news websites to find contrasting views regarding large issues, and he also mentioned rumors have been spread on Weibo, confusing readers a lot.

Participant 5 said he read news through QQ, another leading social network in China. He expressed how he dislikes the work done by journalists who mix their own personal opinions into their professional work. He also stated that the news on social media is also not trustworthy:

I think just people, a bunch of people goofing around, making fun, I think lot of, lots of news from there is also, mm, is controlled by people, people's personal thoughts, so, I just, I will wait, if there is a big, big information, big things happened, like Malaysian Airline, and other things, I will dig, dig, dig deep, if I really want to know the answer.

Participant 10 described the news on QQ as “just for scandals and entertainment.” All these expressions about Chinese social media indicated that participants do not have confidence in political news via social media. It seems that participants are generally suspicious toward China’s media in terms of its trustworthiness and credibility. Besides Chinese media, is there any international media that participants would trust?
All participants had some interaction with international mainstream media. Some of them had climbed the wall to visit international mainstream media while they were in China, and some started visiting them only after arriving in the United States. The most frequently-mentioned international mainstream websites were CNN and BBC. All 12 participants were skeptical about the political news, especially the political news about China, reported by the international mainstream media.

Some participants’ criticisms of international mainstream media focused on distortion and subjectivity embodied in the political news related to China. Participant 7 gave an example to show how the report on international media provided readers incorrect information and why he distrusts these types of reports:

I don't trust them, so like, because such things have, I mean, there are many examples do show that foreign media, I know, maybe they did not get the real information, oh I don't know whatever purpose they have, they sometimes do provide some wrong information and wrong picture, and wrong words, and that have been provided, that have been proved time to time, there are too many examples.

I: Can you give me one example about it?

Okay, like, there was one time, foreign press gave a photo on which they say the government military is doing, is, on the street, stop the protests of Wei U ethnic, that thing, that picture is wrong, in fact that's not true, that picture the foreign provided was in fact a picture taken 2 years earlier, that picture is, I don't
remember, maybe it's military drill or something like that. So, whatever the picture they can cut, a picture to show the thing you want show, and conceal the things you don't want to show.

Similarly, participant 12 said, “Actually, in BBC or United States news, I think there’s some like, some kind of, kind of fake news, or probably not fake, but some…not reliable. I think every media has this kind of problem.”

According to the analysis of interview data, the interactions between participants and international media seem distanced and infrequent. No participant stated that he/she visits international media every day and relies on them for news information. Most participants admitted that they are still maintaining their routine of visiting the same websites as they did in China. This might be attributed to the language barrier and the cultural gap, but it could also be related to the impact of their overall skeptical views of international news websites.

The reason why participants distrust Internet media might be related to the censorship that the Chinese government has exerted on the Internet. Such censorship may have influenced Chinese people’s beliefs about the media and may have caused resistance to press confidence. Participant 1 described how censorship changed her beliefs about news:

Yeah, maybe I aware of there is censorship, so I won't believe the news I saw, as easily as it supposed to be, like every time I read about the news, I would doubt it at the first time, because, I have the impression that, there must be censorship, so, there, the truth, the facts I saw in the news probably, or 90 percent, (laugh), can be that it's not the whole truth.
Where is the truth - Critical evaluation of news media

Where do people find the truth if the media are not trustworthy? Participants with suspicions about the news media said they visit different types of websites to compare and combine the information and then try to reach the truth. It seems that they have developed their own strategies to synthesize political news from multiple sources without relying on any single media outlet.

Participant 12 described his strategy to look for truth:

…I can grab one opinion from one medium company like BBC and I can grab another thing from China, from the medium in China...I also grab another like Bloomberg, something like that. If I have time I just compare them to find, okay, which one I try to trust the most. Or just, just, I, I say grab all the information and derive for my derivation.

Similarly, participant 6 said:

I think. I just feel like if you are interested about something, you maybe will search the keywords on Google, but by doing, you can get more information source, not from one particular website but from all kinds of different sources. That's what I tend to do.

Participant 4 used the Wukan Protests as an example to demonstrate how he understands what is really going on:

… for example, the Wukan Protest news, they are in Xinhua, they said something, in Wangyi, they said something, in the newspaper they said something, neither of
them, maybe, neither of them is necessary true, you have to read all of them, and think about what is happened there, and based on your own experience, because everyone has their own opinion, Wangyi and Xinhua net, they are supported by different people, the people, the real people, the writer had their own opinion, so, not only in China, in everywhere you have to learn to, to think by yourself, yes, that is how I read the news, sometimes I, I know I cannot the reality, the truth, but, I can do some analysis, I am trying to get closer to the truth, that is interesting. Yes, that's it.

It seems that distrust toward media encouraged or impelled participants to invest the effort to critically review the news and selectively absorb the information. As participant 5 described, he “will dig, dig, dig deep, if I want to know the answer.” The fact that media censorship exists has made respondents very wary and selective in their news choices. They also actively seek information from multiple channels and try to determine where the truth lies. They don’t blindly accept any one particular media version of events. In a way, the challenges presented by Internet censorship have increased their own self-efficacy with respect to finding credible information online.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

The findings of the case study of the Wukan Protests agrees well with the literature review, demonstrating that China’s censorship is effective in a variety of way in influencing all different media spheres. The Chinese government has adopted various strategies to control each different sphere of media. The Chinese official media work as part of the propaganda machine, meticulously following the requirements of censorship. As a result, the Chinese mainstream media tend to self-censor their content, style, and routines to satisfy the government’s mandate when reporting sensitive political issues. To social media users, the Chinese government’s censorship appears more obvious and direct. Participants reported that online searches for Wukan came with no results and the postings were deleted immediately. Even the international media cannot avoid China’s censorship; their websites can be blocked and the connection to them is deliberately made slow and difficult.

The Chinese individuals’ online experiences expressed in interviews confirm the existing ubiquitous and effective censorship that the Chinese government applies to the Internet. According to the interviews, China’s online censorship frustrates Internet users in various ways: deleting their posts and pictures, blocking websites, and restricting search results. As illustrated by the experiences of the study’s participants, the Chinese Firewall is an effective machine that prevents individuals from searching, writing, discussing, and communicating on the Internet. The findings of the interviews also show that censorship is generally passive but influential, and influences people’s physical online activities as well as their emotional and psychological states.
Although the censorship usually does not lead to physical punishment, its deterrent has modified people’s online activities to some extent. People in China have created multiple ways to avoid censorship, and the development of such methods has supported expression of political ideas and public talk. This is consistent with some scholars’ finding that the official Internet control cannot be fully realized and successful all the time because communication technologies challenge the existing censorship system (Xiao Q., 2011) (Yang G., 2010).

The study also found that online censorship may have impacted Chinese individuals’ beliefs about media. Participants not only are suspicious of political news posted on Chinese official media websites, Chinese mainstream media, and Chinese social media, but they are also skeptical about the political news reported by international mainstream media. The online censorship that the Chinese government implements tries to suppress information about particular periods of history, hide some social realities, and make it difficult for people to discuss and exchange political ideas. However, what censorship has actually done is to make people doubt the credibility of political news, and even in some cases pushed them to dig deeper for the truth.

The results of this study also suggest that China’s Internet users are not satisfied with political news reporting in several ways; censorship prevents Internet users from knowing the truth and participating in political discussions. However, censorship also causes deep dissatisfaction with the national media and tends to lead people to assiduously search for the truth from all available sources. China’s censorship “is designed to limit freedom of speech of the Chinese people” (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013, p.1) and, no doubt, is aimed at regulating and controlling Internet users’ ability to fully acquire desired information online. However, an unintended consequence might be that people have become suspicious about political news
reporting in any media. As the language and the tone of political news reporting becomes predictable, people become highly aware of “acceptable” viewpoints not only in the Chinese media, but also in the Western media. Participant 6 makes it clear that he is aware of the “language” of Chinese official media. He then further explained why the pre-set attitude of media makes people doubt the quality of news:

I don't think you, as media, if you too much emphasize on your attitude, it will decrease your new quality.

According to the interview findings, the greater the degree of dissatisfaction and suspicion about news media, the greater the chance that participants will view political news negatively and tend to develop their own strategies for exploring for the truth. Participants who develop their own strategies for online searches are more likely to challenge the credibility of any media and are usually confident in their personal ability to seek and find the truth. Participant 7's quote confirms this finding:

...actually with Internet you get information from different people from both sides, you have good views of the thing, and also you can develop your, develop your ability to see and, I mean, to see information in a more reasonable way, so I don't take any information for sure, so, I mean, there are a lot of information, and, but all of them are true, so just over the time, you will become more confident, and also more reasonable in getting these information.

The participants in this study demonstrated through their experiences that their dissatisfaction with news reporting is related to their self-efficacy when looking for factual information on the Internet. As one of the participants said, “China's censorship is stupid.” The negative reactions to “predictable” and “stupid” censorship techniques may have led, or to some
extent motivated, individual Chinese to look for alternatives and selectively view the news from multiple sources. People with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to think critically and take action to solve difficult tasks (Bandura, 1997). Ironically, online censorship might in the end help individual Chinese to critically evaluate online political information.

Participants' ability to seek truth seems contingent upon the Internet's unique and powerful information services, since the Internet provides users a wealth of information and challenges conventional approaches to ideological political news reporting. This implies the subtle impact the Internet has had on Chinese society; individual Chinese have been technologically assisted to withstand censorship by searching and critically absorbing diverse online information.
CHAPTER 7
IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted over a limited time period, possibly impacting the depth of interviews and amount of data collected. The 12 interviews were carried out in a large midwestern university in the United States and included only Chinese graduate students, so the findings may not apply to other populations in different areas. Although the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of Chinese individuals’ online experiences, the findings of this qualitative study may not be generalizable to the larger Chinese population.

Participants in the study were required to speak English during the interviews. The primary advantage of speaking English for all participants is to gain a consistent understanding of their personal experiences with the Internet in China; the reliability and validity of interview data could be enhanced because there was no requirement for translation that could result in inaccurate interpretation. Although the vast majority of participants spoke English fluently, it is possible that some participants may have had difficulty in finding appropriate words and terminology to describe their experiences.

Another possible limitation of this qualitative study is that interviewees may inadvertently try to please the interviewer by saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear, or intentionally say the opposite to be different from others (Newton, 2010).

Finally, as an instrument of qualitative research, my own perspectives, Chinese background, and subjectivity could have influenced the findings of this study. For example, the participants may feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences with me because we share
the same background. Also, some aspects of their experiences may have only been touched very briefly because participants assumed I knew already certain things about the Internet in China.

**Implications**

This study has a number of implications that might be fruitful for future studies. It is clear that Chinese individuals’ personal online experience is an important factor to consider when investigating the ongoing social and political changes produced by the Internet in China. Traditionally, research about China’s Internet starts with the expectation of radical and revolutionary change in the context of pursuing Western democracy as a form of government, and individual Chinese perspectives are ignored or assumed to meet this expectation. Especially after the Arab Spring, a pessimistic view of China’s Internet is strongly present in the academic world (Fallows, 2011). The voice of individual Chinese is rarely represented in research focusing on the Chinese government and its censorship apparatus. Future studies involving in-depth interviews with individual Chinese users about their online experiences could contribute to enriching our understanding of the role of the Internet in present-day China. It is worth noting that all participants were willing to share their perspectives and awareness about China’s censorship and, perhaps contrary to expectation, they were not reluctant to discuss their political views and activities in China. This indicates that the younger generation in contemporary China may develop a stronger engagement with politics, and their experiences may provide us with more surprising findings about China’s Internet.

One important implication of this study for journalism practitioners is that nearly all participants hold strong suspicions toward the news media, including both Chinese and international media. This challenges the ideological divide originating from the Cold War era
that may estrange readers coming from different contexts. As one participant pointed out, an international mainstream media outlet used a photo taken two years earlier to explain a current political event in China, and he claimed that similar incidents happened several times in different international media outlets. Western journalists may need to increase their understanding of the Chinese culture as more and more Chinese students come to the US for higher education. Fact-checking for foreign news must be strengthened, and the use of outside sources can be diversified to increase their credibility.

By comparison with the secret and not well-known surveillance in the United States (Nakashima, 2013), China’s open and ubiquitous censorship may work and impact Chinese society in a different way. A comparative study could be done with both Chinese and American users to see how people react to censorship on the Internet in a different cultural context and what digital censorship means to our lives.

In addition, further research regarding the relationship between media dissatisfaction and media self-efficacy could help us understand the impact of new media on our society. The negative perception of media could become a source of self-efficacy, as demonstrated in this study. However, due to the small number of interviewees, this study cannot determine whether self-efficacy is the cause of participants’ strong suspicions regarding the media. Participants in this study were all highly-educated and have cross-cultural experiences, so it is important to consider that the manner in which they behave online might be different from that of other groups of Chinese individuals. More studies are needed to confirm the sources of mistrust of media coverage and to further extend the concept of self-efficacy in the context of the digital world.
REFERENCES


Khazan, O. (2012, November 8). *What it’s like to use the Internet in China*. Retrieved from washingtonpost:  


https://en.greatfire.org/blog/2011/dec/wukan-blocked-only-weibo


NetEase. (2014, June 5). *Corporate Profile*. Retrieved from 163:  


The purpose of this interview is to investigate participants’ experiences with the Internet in China in terms of political participation, their understanding about the particular public event that this study is working on, and their attitudes toward Chinese government control over the Internet.

1. Please tell me your experience with the Internet in China, like when you started using it, what you usually did online and how often you used it.

2. How do you feel the environment online in comparison with the reality in China? How do you like it?

3. How does the Internet impact your life such as social activities?

4. How would you describe the advantage and the limitation of the Internet in China?

5. How would you use the Internet to participate the political debates?

6. How do you feel about the censorship that Chinese government has applied on the Internet in China?

7. What would you do if you really want some information that’s been censored and blocked by Chinese government?

8. Where did you read political news on the Internet? How do you view the credibility of those political news?

9. Is there any news website that you like? Do you trust it? Why?

10. How do you like the international news websites?
11. Have you heard about the Wukan Protest that happened in September 2011? How did you know about it?

12. What is it about Wukan that impressed you most?

13. What would you do if you are in a situation that you need to protest to reach justice? Do you prefer to conduct online demonstration to call people’s attention or protest in reality? Why?
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** Revolution or evolution: Individual rights and government control in China

**Investigators:** Di Pei

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that the Internet has brought to Chinese society by interviewing Chinese graduate students about their perspectives regarding the impact of the Internet on Chinese politics.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you have considerable knowledge and experience with Internet use in China, non-Chinese students will be excluded from this study.

**Description of Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to describe your online experiences; your awareness and your understanding of the Wukan Protests. The interview will be a semi-structured interview and expected to last about 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed and reviewed for analysis. Your participation will last for about 45 minutes.
**Risks or Discomforts**

Because this is a politically sensitive topic, there is the potential for risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this study. While the researcher will take steps to protect your confidentiality, there is a risk that others could identify you or your responses when the results of this study are shared. If your identity becomes known, you may face stigmatization by your peers, or be harassed, attacked, or targeted online by others with differing political opinions. You may risk provoking the Chinese government if the opinions you express during the interview are in opposition of that government.

**Benefits**

If you decide to participate in this study, there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping people have better understanding of the impact of the Internet.

**Costs and Compensation**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Participant Rights**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Confidentiality

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: Participants’ identity information will not be collected. The researcher will not ask for the participants’ real Chinese name but give pseudonyms in order to avoid the potential risk of breaching identity. The audio recordings will not be shared in any dissemination of this study. Although the researchers are protecting your identity to the best extent possible, we cannot assure complete confidentiality. Someone may be able to infer your identity, as the study is with a small and specific group of people at your institution.
Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, contact Di Pei at dpei@iastate.edu or Daniela V. Dimitrova at danielad@iastate.edu. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.