

Fragmented Authoritarianism? Reforms to China's Internet censorship system under Xi Jinping

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Abstract

How has President Xi Jinping gained control over China's central-level Internet bureaucracy and major social media companies? What implications does the China case hold for understanding bureaucratic implementation of authoritarian Internet censorship policies? This paper addresses both questions by considering the Xi administration's efforts to re-shape China's central-level Internet control agencies, such as the new Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). Through interviews with Chinese Internet professionals and journalists who regularly deal with officials responsible for censorship, I find that two preconditions – elite thinking about the value of nuanced and proactive online information control, and symbiotic state-company relations – are important in enabling highly centralized censorship but do not by themselves explain why re-centralization has been so successful since 2012. Rather, the key determinant of success has been the transfer of social media regulatory functions away from what I term “traditional” (security and propaganda) agencies and to new specialized organs which are both more loyal to Xi, and more new media savvy. This suggests that the allocation of control over Internet policy within authoritarian bureaucracies may be a key factor shaping the relative robustness of different regimes' online censorship programs.

Keywords

China, censorship, bureaucracy, Internet, social media, authoritarianism

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1 Introduction

How has Xi Jinping succeeded in centralizing control over China's Internet bureaucracy since 2012, and what are the implications for understanding the broader connection between authoritarian leaders and the agents they rely on to implement online control? The first question entails understanding the bureaucratic processes that make China's Internet censorship robust, while the second links to trans-national comparative theorizing about how Internet regulation as policy area may differ from other areas. This paper addresses the first question in order to ground comparative analysis of the second. It takes as case study President Xi's Internet centralization program since taking office, especially the formation of a new Communist Party leading group of top officials to oversee Internet regulation and the reshuffling of various government agencies' 'digital' portfolios. Data are drawn from interviews with media professionals, journalists and others in China's Internet industry.

The paper's findings both speak to existing theories about the Chinese bureaucracy and Chinese authoritarianism, and support broader comparative theorizing about what state capabilities are necessary for robust censorship. First, the example of Xi's Internet centralization challenges prior research that state authority in large authoritarian systems is often fragmented along administrative and geographic lines, what Lieberthal and Oksenberg termed "fragmented authoritarianism" (1988).

Second, taking Xi's Internet reform program as case study can ground broader comparative theorizing about the conditions under which authoritarian censorship programs is effective, both in terms of speed, and regarding how fine-grained or coarse are content deletion and blocking efforts. Substantial variation exists among authoritarian states in the degree of information control they actually exercise (Freedom House, 2015). While much attention has been paid to why autocrats would want to censor or not, their bureaucratic capacity to do so effectively has not received the same focus. Formal models in this vein typically treat the state as unitary actor, an analytically useful but empirically fraught assumption. If we dispense with this simplification, a host of questions arise. At which level(s) of government is censorship carried out? What is the legal or regulatory role of private Internet companies? Is censorship more effectively implemented by Internet-specific agencies, the police, or media and propaganda apparatchiks? Finally, what combinations of these factors have proven most effective?

While this paper cannot fully address these questions, my findings do offer important in-

sights both for China and for comparative work. From interviews I identified three relevant factors: a) longstanding thinking among political elites as to the value of ICT control, as well as having made prior efforts; b) a symbiotic relationship between the state and Internet companies; and c) whether specialized agencies get the Internet management portfolio or whether other agents – especially media and propaganda agencies, and the state security apparatus – are given jurisdiction over online space. I argue that for China, the first two conditions have been necessary but insufficient because both existed prior to Xi taking power. China is fairly unique among states in the degree to which the ruling party has stressed centralized control over ICTs, going back to the telegraph under the Qing Dynasty (Zhou 2006) and before. And no other authoritarian state has as large and vibrant a domestic Internet sector as China’s, and one so deeply invested in symbiosis with political authority.

But even if these conditions are present, which agencies hold the Internet portfolio matters for whether censorship policy will be adequately flexible and swift to adapt to such a dynamic medium. A corollary to this third factor is that who gets put in charge of the Internet is inseparable from President Xi’s broader struggle to consolidate power away from bureaucratic incumbents he views as opposed to his reform program. These three factors then suggest that the Internet sector may differ substantially from the policy fragmentation found elsewhere. This makes formal models’ assumption of a unitary, rational state more plausible than many Chinese and bureaucratic politics scholars have been willing to allow.

2 Relevant Literature

Recent work on authoritarian information control can be divided into formal and non-formal variants. Recent formal models (Lorentzen 2014; Egorov, Guriev and Sonin 2009; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Whitten-Woodring and James 2012; Little 2015; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015; Chen and Xu 2014) have focused on the trade-offs dictators face between information openness, and closedness, the so-called “Dictator’s Dilemma” (Wintrobe 1998). Such models often treat the state or dictator as unitary and able to choose an optimal censorship level. Thus, while these models explain why rulers might prefer more or less information control, most do not address the possibility that leaders might be constrained by limited bureaucratic capabilities and unable to achieve their optimal censorship point.

In contrast, non-formal studies of authoritarian censorship – in their academic (Dimitrov

2014a; 2014b; 2015; Esarey 2013; Esarey and Xiao 2011; Fu, Chan and Chau 2013; Howard and Hussain 2011; Lynch 2011; Ng 2014; Roberts 2015; Shirk (ed.) 2010; Yang 2009; Zheng 2007) and journalistic (MacKinnon 2012; Morozov 2011) variants – generally paint a more realistic picture of state capabilities and the policy implementation tensions that exist among agencies. Such work has been useful in identifying which agencies are involved in the censorship process. Additionally, by focusing on the “cat and mouse” game between Chinese netizens and the censors (Yang 2009; Shirk (ed.) 2010; Esarey and Xiao 2011), these studies have indirectly suggested that bureaucratic divisions may sometimes allow censorable content to appear online as Internet companies decline to censor absent specific orders, at least until higher-ups intervene. However, this body of work also has shortcomings. Much of it (MacKinnon 2012; Hu 2016) tends to approach Chinese censorship from a legal perspective, leading to an overly formalistic treatment of which “relevant agencies” are responsible for issuing orders, and neglecting fundamental political questions about which agents have the ear of central leaders.

A third relevant strain is the bureaucratic politics literature. Prior studies of the Chinese bureaucracy in other issue areas (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Lieberthal 1995; Li 1998; Brodsgaard 2006; Mertha 2005; 2008) have yielded important insights into the organizational structures within which Party officials design and implement policy objectives. These contributions present the Chinese state as a “fragmented authoritarian” system in which ministerial officials below the top leadership as well as lower levels of government can and do shape policy outcomes. Additionally, work on China’s media and propaganda bureaucracy (Lynch 1999; Shambaugh 2007; Brady 2008; Stockmann 2013) has highlighted the differing interests of Party propaganda departments (at the central and provincial levels), provincial and central government agencies and media organizations.

The fragmented authoritarian framework is today foundational to Chinese political analysis. Yet when they first introduced their framework, the authors considered its applicability only to a subset of Chinese government institutions – and certainly could not have foreseen the consequences the rise of the Internet would have for its appropriate scope. Indeed, recent empirical studies (Zhu et al 2013; Fu, Chan and Chau 2013; King, Pan and Roberts 2013; 2014; 2016; Ng 2014) reveal that Internet censorship is comprehensive and above all, swift, with content often disappearing within minutes or hours. King, Pan and Roberts describe the censors as displaying “large-scale, military-like precision” (2013, p.1). Put simply, a censorship system where conflict between different agents is endemic should not display the nimbleness

that these results appear to show, not only in response to routine topics, but also unexpected crises.

The fact that censorship, at least in high-priority cases such as mass incidents, is that nimble does not require overturning all that we know about the Chinese bureaucracy, but it does suggest that fragmented authoritarianism may have limited explanatory power regarding Internet regulation. Such a claim, however, should not be made lightly – the burden should be on researchers to show not only that the Internet censorship administrative system is more unified than other issues, but how and why the conflicts to which other policies are captive do not apply to the digital sphere.

The following sections undertake this task through a case study of Xi’s attempts to re-centralize the Internet bureaucracy immediately following his 2012 ascent to power. After briefly explaining data collection and research methods, I consider leader intentions to reform this system prior to Xi. Third, I address the symbiotic relationship between Internet companies and the state. Lastly, a comparison of pre- and post-reform bureaucratic structures reveals how concerted efforts to empower Internet “experts” at the expense of both China’s existing propaganda system and the state security apparatus transformed China’s censorship system from moderately strong, to very robust.

3 Data and Method

This project’s primary data source is 57 targeted elite interviews I conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Hong Kong in 2014-15 and summer 2016. The three mainland sites are home to nearly all of China’s Internet media giants. Hong Kong was included as it is home to a number of journalists and communications scholars who study mainland censorship. Interviewees fell into one of three major categories: Internet company insiders, journalists, or media-oriented academics. Due to the topic’s sensitive nature and the restrictive political climate at the time of fieldwork, I did not record interviewees but relied on handwritten notes taken during and after each interview. To protect their identities, all interviewees for this project are cited anonymously, with each citation giving only the interview number (by order conducted), city, and date, with limited background information given only where safe to do so.¹

¹Location codes: BJ = Beijing, HK = Hong Kong, SZ = Shenzhen, GZ = Guangzhou, SH = Shanghai.

Interviews usually lasted about 1-2 hours and were as casual as possible to put participants at ease and invite them to share information on their own terms. Questions were semi-structured: I chose about 10 questions per interview from a loosely standardized list of several dozen, based on their anticipated relevance to the interviewee's expert knowledge, and to avoid excessive sensitivity that might provoke a non-cooperative response. My interviewee pool began with a few individuals reached via academic contacts in the U.S. and China, and grew through the snowball method; at the end of each interview I asked the participant to refer close friends or associates who might be willing to speak – typically, this led to 1-2 referrals of long-trusted contacts.² Through persistence, I was able to slowly build out the pool until I had reached over 40 individuals by the end of fieldwork.³ Due to the political constraints prevalent in 2014-16 – an anti-corruption crackdown that heightened officials' fear and paranoia, as well as a specific effort beginning in late 2014 to 'rectify' (*zhenggai*) the behavior of Internet-relevant cadres, access to government officials was severely limited.⁴ Nonetheless, I was able to speak to some high-ranking executives in major Internet companies, senior newspaper editors, and academics who regularly consulted with officials about 'Internet management', all of which allowed me to partially compensate for the lack of official access.

Clearly, this sample was not random. If the goal were to collect a representative summary of Internet practitioner and scholar views on Internet censorship, this would be an issue. It is not because my purpose was instead a) to ascertain matters of fact related to the functions of various bureaucratic departments regarding censorship, as well as each agency's policy ambit and general reason for existence, and b) to acquire a sample (albeit nonrandom) of informed opinions about leader intentions with respect to Internet control and bureaucratic reform, especially the thinking of elites (roughly, members of the CCP Central Committee and above). Regarding the first objective, bureaucratic purpose is inter-subjective – by definition mutually agreed upon and widely shared among all insiders in a given community. Thus, if several interviewees who were all part of the same community gave similar answers, I was able to draw a reliable inference about the portion of the bureaucracy they interfaced with.

²I attribute interviewees' typically limited number of referrals both to the topic sensitivity and the political pressure on media practitioners under Xi, and the topic's specific and technical nature, which may have led interviewees to carefully filter their contact lists for individuals they thought would actually be able to say something useful.

³I interviewed about ten exceptionally valuable participants more than once, giving a total of 57 interviews.

⁴Two well-networked sources did reach out on my behalf to officials in the Beijing Propaganda Department, and I did establish contact with a high-ranking Shenzhen official who was well-connected in the city's tech sector. These individuals all declined to be interviewed after learning my specific topic.

Concerning leader intentions, interviewees' educated speculations were not intended as standalone evidence, but rather to be used alongside a close reading of Internet-relevant Party policy documents. Although inferring individuals' intentions from publicly available documents is fraught with uncertainty, the evidence presented below is still sufficient to establish an intensification in official thinking about reforming the Internet bureaucracy beginning around 2011-12, but one rooted in longstanding ideas about information control. Leaders did not re-invent their attitudes regarding the Internet from whole cloth; indeed, the basic objectives of such a regime showed continuity pre- and post-2011. Instead, what changed around 2011 was the intensity and urgency with which leaders sought to reshape the Internet bureaucracy to implement more active management, a development I explore further in the following section.

4 Party Leaders: Seizing Social Media's "Commanding Heights"

Former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum "social stability overrides everything" (*shehui wending ya dao yiqie*) has profoundly shaped Chinese leaders' thinking not only about real-world popular mobilization, but also the Internet and social media.⁵ Any analysis of how Party elites weigh the costs and benefits of firmly regulating online social spaces must first acknowledge that leaders' concern about these technologies' potential both to spur collective action, and to effect a longer-term change in popular attitudes toward the regime, is a limiting factor in every related decision they make. All groups of interviewees consistently echoed this theme, which also squares with recent quantitative research about online collective action (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; 2014). One commentator at a Beijing newspaper attributed this depth of leaders' fear to their experiences as victims of persecution from the mobilized masses during the Cultural Revolution, suggesting that both Xi Jinping and Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) director Lu Wei were especially affected by this horrific past and determined to maintain the Party's grip on communication channels.⁶ Officials' precise concern, to paraphrase one Beijing academic, is the 'slippery slope' argument: leaders fear that if they allow speech on certain topics, discussion could veer in a direction much more hostile to the Party's image.⁷

Officials' view of social media's mobilizing potential therefore shaped their interpretation

⁵Throughout, I refer to the Internet and social media interchangeably. While social media is only one segment of online activity, for purposes of controlling online discourse it exemplifies what officials view as the Internet's most dangerous characteristics.

⁶Interview #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

⁷Interview #2, BJ, 9/10/14. The interviewee did not use the words 'slippery slope'; it is my interpretation of his remarks originally in Mandarin.

of the state of the Chinese Internet during the 2000s, or as one interviewee put it, ten years of “chaos” (*luan*), a reference that poignantly evokes past periods in CCP history of disorder and breakdown of authority.⁸ While such an uncontrolled situation persisted throughout the 2000s, in retrospect elites viewed 2009-12 as particularly disorderly, both in terms of new forms like microblogs spurring actual collective protests, and in terms of more diffuse and longer-term harm to the Party’s image resulting from a string of online scandals – food safety issues, local environmental protests, conflicts over land rights, and a host of other issues. While such incidents tended to reflect poorly on officialdom generally and served as an embarrassment to the top leadership, elite-level thinking was not the only justification leaders cited as proof of a ‘chaotic’ Web; multiple interviewees also emphasized that they believed the public as well as leaders viewed the Internet as ‘out of control’.⁹

4.1 Social Media as ‘Experiment’ (2009-12)

In the subsequent 2013-14 crackdown, leaders attributed responsibility for this situation to two primary groups of actors: the Internet companies themselves, and influential online commentators: celebrities, lawyers and other public figures.¹⁰ Internet companies were held responsible as the ultimate legal responsibility bearers, while bloggers were blamed for spreading malicious and unverified information. While President Xi and other Party elites retroactively decried these actors’ lack of discipline, in reality the situation was partially a result of leaders’ own deliberate choice to treat China’s late 2000s surge in online activity, especially social media, as an experiment. One foreign correspondent who had been stationed in Beijing during this period argued that officials relied on social media as a way to measure public opinion.¹¹ Another academic interviewee also referred to *Weibo* as ‘experiment’, while adding that this experiment was “instrumental” rather than reflective of leaders’ normative beliefs.¹²

If leaders viewed some liberalized discourse online as instrumentally useful, however, then to what purpose? Especially during the Hu Jintao administration’s latter years, reform-minded

⁸Interview #14, BJ, 11/4/14.

⁹Examples interviewees gave, referencing similar speeches by authorities, include so-called “human flesh” searches (*renrou sousuo*), where netizens would use online information to hunt down and expose alleged corrupt officials, effecting a form of vigilante justice; unverified rumors; and the so-called “Internet Water Army” (*wangluo shuijun*) of hired agencies/PR firms enlisted to bolster a client’s (or knock down an opponent’s) reputation. Interviews: #9, BJ, 9/29/14; #24, BJ, 12/10/14; #28, HK, 1/21/15; #35, SZ, 3/4/15.

¹⁰Sina.com in particular fell into disfavor with the top leadership after promoting ‘hot topics’ (*remen huati*) that were often spread by these high-profile bloggers. Interview #21, BJ, 11/27/14.

¹¹Interview #36 (via Skype while in Shenzhen), 3/6/15.

¹²Interview #30, HK, 2/3/15.

leaders came to view rising corruption as a major threat. Multiple interviewees mentioned that from leaders' view, one of social media's major benefits was to hold local officials in check by providing bottom-up reporting on corruption, environmental disasters and other problems.¹³ In another example, a prominent Shanghai source with strong media official connections, and a Beijing news company employee independently suggested that this logic even extended to high-profile cases such as the 2011 Wenzhou train incident, which involved the collision of two high-speed trains and official attempts to suppress media coverage of the disaster. The cover-up failed after bloggers posted images of officials at the scene on *Weibo*, leading to a massive online outcry. Both interviewees claimed that top leaders used online criticism of how the government handled the tragedy to take down former Minister of Railways Liu Zhijun, who was later charged with corruption.¹⁴

Thus, while officials were clearly concerned about social media's detrimental effects as early as 2009-11, the platform was not entirely without strategic benefit for them during this period. In fact, many interviewees volunteered the idea that in their view, China's leaders were pursuing some variant of 'smart' censorship, restricting both collective action and broader threats to Party legitimacy while allowing some space for targeted criticism.¹⁵ While instances of leaders opening up social media space did not end completely after 2011, the Arab Spring and Wenzhou train accident can nonetheless be identified as turning points that led leaders to adjust their formula toward tighter control.¹⁶ This wake-up call entailed leaders' attempts to reconcile two disparate impulses, which were reflected in a concluding statement from the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Party Congress in 2011.¹⁷ On the one hand, the need to tighten control

¹³One especially clear example came from a Chinese tech industry foreign expert. Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

¹⁴Interviews: #22, BJ, 12/3/14; #25, SH, 12/13/14. While these interviewees are not regime insiders and cannot know top leaders' intentions for certain, they are representative of relevant outsiders' thinking about the Wenzhou incident.

¹⁵All interviewees who volunteered an interpretation of 'strategic' or 'smart' censorship *without* me prompting them are cited here (including cases where interviewees did not reference an overall strategy, but used one or more examples to illustrate elites' broader strategic thinking): #4, BJ, 9/6/14; #15, BJ, 11/5/14; #16, BJ, 11/12/14; #18, BJ, 11/16/14; #22, BJ, 12/3/14; #25, BJ, 12/13/14; #35, SZ, 3/4/15; #36, SZ (via Skype), 3/6/15; #37, GZ, 3/9/15; #39, BJ, 3/17/15; #44, BJ, 4/3/15; #45, BJ, 4/8/15. However, a few interviewees did offer non-strategic explanations for the variation in censorship, such as elites' inaction or internal divisions: #17, BJ, 11/13/14; #30, HK, 2/3/15; #43, BJ, 4/1/15.

¹⁶Although the language of 'turning point' is difficult to falsify, the fact that leaders adopted new language that "Internet development and supervision urgently need to be strengthened and reformed" at the Sixth Plenum, which occurred only months after these events, supports this interpretation (see below footnote). Additionally, three interviewees explicitly mentioned, unprompted, that either the events in the Arab world of early 2011, or Wenzhou were pivotal moments that influenced leaders' thinking. Interviews referencing Arab Spring's role: #14, BJ, 11/4/14; #41, BJ, 3/24/15. Interview referencing Wenzhou incident: #37, GZ, 3/9/15.

¹⁷"Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Major Issues Pertaining to Deepening Reform of the Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Flourishing of Socialist Culture." Passed at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee, 10/18/11. Translated by the English Section of the Central Document Translation Department of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, Beijing, China.

over social media became apparent, as leaders admitted they needed to “speed up the formation of an Internet oversight system that combines the force of the law, administrative supervision, industry self-regulation, technical guarantees, public oversight and the education of society” – reforms ostensibly designed to protect user interests and promote a “healthy Internet culture”, but also to prevent the emergence of counter-narratives that might threaten the Party’s or top leaders’ image.¹⁸ On the other hand, in discovering the need to “seize the high ground” in spreading Internet information, Party elites also had a more proactive vision in mind: to “implement the policy of using the Internet in a positive way” and to “strengthen guidance of online public opinion; and promote ideological and cultural themes.” One interviewee, a Beijing news editor, offered an eyewitness account, relating how in 2011 he attended a meeting with the editor in chief of People’s Daily, who told the assembled editors that they had to be innovative and seize the “ideological battlefield” of social media.¹⁹

Here, leaders went beyond increasing efforts to restrict the Internet’s negative effects, to cultivating a positive image of the Party. One interviewee at a major Beijing technology company attributed this motivation to leaders’ sense of lost ideological legitimacy in the reform era, as well as more material concerns like social inequality that threatened the Party’s claim to represent all Chinese.²⁰ Two other interviewees noted President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on creating a “positive” online environment; implicitly, filtering out ‘negative’ speech, much of which criticized the Party or specific leaders.²¹ To be sure, elites’ conception of “public opinion guidance” as media strategy long predated the Internet: this term has roots in Party leaders’ and propaganda officials’ efforts to reassert control over the press and establishment media following the 1989 Tiananmen movement. Yet while the concept was not new, the way it had to be operationalized in social media versus older formats was radically different, requiring a far more bottom-up approach to shaping viral discussion spaces like *Weibo* without killing the very dynamism that attracted young, educated demographics to the platform. In short, it required the Party to cultivate its own online commentators in addition to restraining celebrity bloggers.

With this considerable challenge, leaders recognized around 2011 that they were falling short on both negative, and positive means of control. On the negative side, attempts at giving

Source: www.cctb.net.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Interview #57, SH, 6/17/16.

²⁰Interview #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

²¹Interviews: #27, HK, 1/16/15; #28, HK, 1/21/15. While President Xi has emphasized such “positivity” to a greater extent than his predecessor, the idea was firmly entrenched as early as 2011 during Hu’s last years; the word “positive” appears ten times in the Central Committee’s 17th Congress 6th Plenum statement.

bloggers some space to editorialize about current events while selectively applying censorship had failed in the eyes of many elites.²² The bureaucracy responsible for enforcing censorship was fragmented, with local Public Security Bureaus – which are decentralized actors under the direction of municipal governments and districts – making judgment calls regarding the Party’s (or just as often, petty individual) interests that went far beyond the ‘Internet Police’ (*wangjing*) mandate, according to a former editor at a major central Party newspaper.²³ Concerning positive control, the Party faced still greater institutional weakness in the inability of the propaganda system to adapt to new media. Several interviewees, particularly journalists and editors who regularly received orders from propaganda officials, noted that the CPD and its provincial-level counterparts suffered from numerous weaknesses that were particularly detrimental in the Internet age, such as being slow in reacting to breaking incidents,²⁴ and failing to grasp social media’s importance in reaching new audiences; this last point, two interviewees noted, was attributable to officials’ “old” age.²⁵ Additionally, although propaganda officials did sometimes grasp the need to extend outright bans on topics (as they often have for press coverage) to social media, one interviewee who regularly monitors the implementation of online censorship told me he had found instances where such directives were flouted online even as traditional media publications complied. While the CPD, as a leading Party organ, theoretically could enforce its will upon all media, its ability to do so *de facto* on the Internet was seriously in question.²⁶

A host of problems concerning what leaders perceived as an out-of-control Internet thus factored into their resolve to tighten control while preserving ‘smart’ censorship’s most useful aspects. In attempting to do so, leaders found the existing central bureaucracy inadequate to the task. All that said and despite numerous weaknesses, China’s leaders started efforts to strengthen the censorship system with important assets not available to other authoritarian states. One such asset was the presence of vibrant domestic Internet companies was an important prerequisite for leaders’ success, which the next section considers.

²²Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

²³Interview #47, BJ, 4/14/15. Regarding ‘individual’ interests, a form of corruption involving Internet company employees accepting money, or being pressured from unauthorized people to delete posts their clients found ‘undesirable’ was also a major impediment to top leader attempts to regulate online space. Interviews: #44, BJ, 4/3/15; #15, BJ, 11/5/14.

²⁴Interview #10, BJ, 10/2/14.

²⁵Interviews: #23, BJ, 12/5/14; #49, BJ, 4/22/15.

²⁶Interview #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

5 Internet Companies' Symbiotic Relation to State Authority

The vibrancy of China's Internet industry contrasts sharply with many of its autocratic peers. While explaining the tech industry's rapid development is an economics or business topic for industries in advanced democracies, in China the sector's abrupt rise constitutes a political puzzle given continuing heavy state involvement in the market. How has such a dynamic sector come to exist in China, particularly since the state retains substantial ownership in television and newspapers? I argue that several factors that long predate the events of 2011 explain the Chinese tech industry's success despite stringent regulation, and its ability to form the scaffolding upon which leaders could carry out a sophisticated censorship strategy. One could begin with obvious economic and cultural factors: China's large and increasingly affluent population, high Internet adoption rates, and the usage of Chinese characters as a common written language (and walling off the sinophone world from more globally mixed language regions). Yet equally important has been the Chinese government's investment in the IT industry, notably the establishment of 'technology parks' for research and development like Beijing's Zhongguancun district. Such investment has not been merely a matter of national policy, but of top leaders' personal interests; as an example, according to a leaked Beijing U.S. Embassy cable, Hu Jintao's son-in-law "ran" Sina.com.²⁷

Although Party investment in Internet media is certainly in part for financial and economic reasons, Party leaders are increasingly doing so in order to practice a form of censorship long prevalent in the West: editorial control through ownership. According to a senior figure at a privately held media company, leaders have awakened to the fact that direct ownership is a very effective means of control.²⁸ Internet media companies, for their part, often depend on large infusions of external financing to stay afloat as they struggle to monetize online services. While some less news content-oriented companies like Tencent and e-commerce sites like Alibaba have been able to monetize a range of services on their platforms, the situation is very different for microblogs like Sina *Weibo* and news portals. My interviewee explained that *Weibo* in particular was very expensive to maintain (in terms of technology and software developer costs), and as the government had a vested interest in shaping the platform's content, it became a natural investor to which Sina executives were then beholden.²⁹ While lack of profitability has been a

²⁷Leaked U.S. Embassy Beijing diplomatic cable, July 9, 2009. See <http://www.wikileaks.org/cable/2009/07/09BEIJING2112.html>.

²⁸Interview #54, BJ, 6/8/16.

²⁹Interview #54, BJ, 6/8/16.

serious threat to microblogs elsewhere – e.g. Twitter in the U.S. – in China government-directed investment has kept these services afloat while ensuring their parent companies’ political loyalty.

Third, while censorship regulations have been onerous and “a major time suck” for company executives according to one domestic company source,³⁰ it would be a vast overstatement to assert that they have crippled the sector. One company official who was responsible for implementing government censorship directives bluntly stated that the cost of carrying out censorship was simply “not enough to matter”, mentioning that the company only needed one or two full time employees for this task.³¹ Internet companies also provide surveillance and intelligence information on citizens.³² On the positive side, the Chinese tech sector has been beneficial to the national economy, with companies like Tencent serving as market ‘disruptors’ by integrating services ranging from digital payment to taxi hailing into their platforms.³³ Based on numerous interviews and contrary to perceptions in the West, it is simply not true that the censorship burden has stifled Internet company innovativeness, including in the online media sector. Except for editorial content limitations and the need to filter or delete some user-generated content, companies are free to attract clicks and views however they see fit.

A fourth factor is that the same censorship requirements that impose a limited burden on Internet companies also offer them protection from foreign competition; as domestic companies become more compliant with censorship directives, they remain acceptable to Chinese leaders while foreign companies struggle with both market entry, and complying with directives once in-country.³⁴ However, despite their privileged position in China’s economy, Internet giants’ freedom to innovate and make money is still not entirely safe from government meddling, as some central-level officials have a stronger interest in ‘the market’ over the Party’s political goals than others.³⁵ Company executives thus expend great effort to ensure they remain in the good graces of relevant agencies.

In sum, China’s large Internet companies and the state enjoy a symbiotic relationship where

³⁰Interview #1, BJ, 9/9/14.

³¹The individual was referring to search engine censorship, which is indeed much less labor-intensive compared with microblogs and other online spaces. However, the interviewee clearly intended to make a broader point about Internet censorship overall. Interview # 53, BJ, 6/8/16.

³²One company insider mentioned how Baidu supplied search data about the Falun Gong to the government in 2004. He said Baidu had proven similarly useful to the government in other cases. Interview #47, BJ, 4/14/15.

³³One Sina employee called China’s Internet sector the “most innovative in the world” except for politically sensitive content. Interview #51, BJ, 6/6/16.

³⁴One senior Internet company representative, although stating that censorship’s primary intent was not protectionism, nonetheless admitted that it had that benefit. Interview #39, BJ, 3/17/15.

³⁵One interviewee at a major Chinese media company bluntly stated that the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) “doesn’t give a **** about the market.” Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

the former enjoys much-needed state investment and market protectionism, while granting the latter compliance with censorship directives, and even proactively working to exercise “self-discipline” in ensuring the spread of pro-Party messages online. While the existence of this symbiosis does much to account for robust state control over Internet companies, the factors in this section were already either strongly present or at least underway prior to Xi taking power in 2012, and so cannot explain the bureaucracy’s increasingly robust control after that date. Doing so requires a look at the specific state agencies and actors to which companies are *most directly* accountable and how such a bureaucratic configuration has changed in the Xi era.

6 The Internet Bureaucracy Pre-Reform (1990s-2011): Partial Fragmentation

In reforming the Internet bureaucracy, Chinese leaders did not begin from scratch prior to the events of 2011. To the contrary, a handful of agencies ‘held down the fort’, enabling top leaders to achieve their minimum objective during urgent online breaking events: to effectively suppress and delete information they perceived as harmful to the Party’s or their personal interests. This section analyzes these pre-existing agencies beginning at the municipal level.

6.1 Holding Down the Fort: Actors at the Provincial/municipal Level

An initial key aspect to understanding China’s Internet bureaucracy is that it is a two-tiered system: censorship directives can and do come either from the central government, or from the provincial level, while major policy decisions are made centrally.³⁶ While such decentralization often leads to bureaucratic fragmentation and conflict between levels in other policy areas, in regulating China’s Internet giants the situation is greatly simplified by the fact that most major companies are located in Beijing, with a few in Shanghai and Guangdong, and almost none anywhere else.³⁷ Such a situation contrasts markedly to other economic sectors in China, where production occurs in multiple jurisdictions. The fact that the number of lower-level governments is minimal allows the center to both delegate much oversight to these few local governments, and intervene expediently when needed. The following sub-sections discuss the essential features of the most important local and central actors charged with Internet regulation.

³⁶In the Chinese system, Beijing Municipality is the administrative equivalent to a “province”.

³⁷To simplify, in the following analysis I assume that an example company is located in Beijing.

6.1.1 The Public Security Bureau (e.g. “Internet Police”)

The Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB, a.k.a. “the police”) play a vital role as the enforcers of both written Internet laws and regulations, and the political will of Party elites. While the Beijing PSB is nominally affiliated with the central Ministry of Public Security, in fact it is under the direct leadership of the Beijing municipal government, from whom it receives its budget and personnel. The Beijing police, like all local police throughout China, are thus decentralized, dependent on government authorities in the jurisdiction where they are based rather than on higher-level public security officials. Within the Beijing PSB there is an Internet unit, popularly known as the *wangjing* (literally “Internet police”). Due to China’s system of localized media control, social media sites registered in Beijing are thus under the Beijing *wangjing*’s direct oversight – in fact, one interviewee with extensive contacts in the Beijing technology industry noted that major companies like Sina have Internet police “in-house” that are constantly monitoring user posts.³⁸

This decentralized situation, even prior to reform, did not preclude the PSB expediently enforcing ‘priority’ censorship orders from the center as well as Beijing municipality during urgent breaking events, but it did result in a lack of clarity regarding the appropriate scope of *wangjing* activities, and cooperation with other units in top-level initiatives to solidify Internet control. The police’s role in implementing higher-level censorship policies is important because they are the main agency with day-to-day enforcement capacity. Long before 2011, central authorities began pushing legal reform in an effort to clarify the functions of law enforcement, including online. A typical example was an amendment to the 2010 Law on Guarding State Secrets, which contained new provisions specifying how Internet companies were to cooperate with the PSB in the investigation and handling of state security leaks.³⁹ However, the police’s greatest strength – their ability to promote anti-crime and “national security” interests in Internet management – was also a major limitation pre-2011; the PSB then had (and still has) no financial or interest-based stake in regulating online space because taking responsibility for more politicized censorship decisions would do nothing to increase their budget or personnel.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, in the absence of clear superior authority to decide what social media ‘hot topics’ were ‘politically sensitive’, prior to the reforms begun in 2011 such judgment calls often ended up in the Internet police’s hands. According to a tech sector worker, the Internet companies

³⁸Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

³⁹Source: http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2010-04/30/content_1596420.htm.

⁴⁰Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

“dare not” disobey the PSB even though “its authority is limited to security matters.” He noted that the police “don’t have the right” to censor politically sensitive content, but “do it anyway.”⁴¹ The Beijing PSB’s *de facto* political power as regulator of Sina *Weibo* and other major services also caused cross-jurisdictional conflicts, as officials or police in other provinces would have to lobby Beijing officers to order companies to delete unwanted content.⁴² Such fragmentation was a major target of the post-2011 restructuring.

6.1.2 The Beijing Internet Propaganda Culture Management Office/Beijing Internet Information Office (a.k.a. “Internet Management Office”)

The other pivotal office overseeing Internet censorship in Beijing goes by three different names. For foreign English speakers, it is referred to as the “Beijing Internet Management Office”, a title that aptly reflects its broad functional role. In Chinese, it has two names. Prior to 2013, it was little publicized and known to insiders as the “Beijing Internet Propaganda Culture Management Office” (*Beijingshi hulianwang xuanchuan wenhua guanli bangongshi*),⁴³ a title that reflects its position in China’s propaganda system. Before 2013, it was a *party*, not governmental body under the oversight of the Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department. In 2013, this office was given an official *governmental* name – the “Beijing Internet Information Office” (*beijingshi hulianwang xinxi bangongshi*) – and was tasked with overseeing a host of other municipal-level agencies that deal with Internet regulation – including the Beijing Internet police. Thus, this office now fuses Communist Party, and Beijing government authority under one roof, a situation referred to in Chinese as *yi men hang, liang kuai paizi* or “one door, two signboards.”

Regardless of its name, this office is *the* office directly responsible for issuing orders to the Internet giants in Beijing to delete unwanted content.⁴⁴ Its authority to order deletions far exceeds the PSB’s; while the police generally directly give deletion orders only on ‘security’ or crime-related matters, the Internet Management Office often does so for unwanted content that in its (or its superiors’) judgment a) threatens social stability, b) harms the Party’s image or agenda, or c) insults or even comments on top leaders’ activities, to name just the most common

⁴¹Interview #20, BJ, 11/20/14.

⁴²Interview #9, BJ, 9/29/14. The interviewee’s specific statement was that other jurisdictions had to lobby the Beijing “city government.” However, the Beijing PSB would be the ultimate target of such a lobbying effort.

⁴³Insiders also refer to it as the *wang guan ban*, literally “Internet Management Office” for short, an abbreviation that directly matches its English name. Foreign reports have continued to refer to it as the “Internet Management Office” even after its 2013 Chinese name change.

⁴⁴Interviews: #9, BJ, 9/29/14; #11, BJ, 10/14/14; #14, BJ, 11/4/14; #21, BJ, 11/27/14.

examples. As a member of the Beijing Propaganda Department (which in turn takes orders from the Central Propaganda Department) the Internet Management Office is very powerful, despite the fact that its formal rank is as a *ban* or “office”, a lower-ranking (and typically, smaller and less well-resourced) unit compared with the PSB, which is a “bureau” (*ju*).⁴⁵ The reason has to do with the propaganda system’s exalted role within Chinese governance. Not only is the “Party above the government” – in China, the Communist Party’s organizations set the general political line, while “state” agencies administer and implement this line – but the Propaganda Departments at various levels are among the most important of all Party organs, given the CCP’s longstanding emphasis on propaganda and ideology. This means that the Beijing police are unlikely to take any Internet enforcement action that would contradict either the political will of the Beijing, or the central propaganda authorities.

While the Internet Management Office enjoyed clear strengths as a “one-stop shop” for political Internet censorship decisions in Beijing, it also suffered from serious limitations prior to the post-2011 reforms. First, it had no clear *de jure* central-level superior. Second, the office’s authority, though broad in principle as a Party body, was limited by the fact that it did not have formally defined oversight authority over the Beijing Internet Police or other municipal-level “relevant agencies.” Addressing these deficits was a major task of reforms begun under Hu, and greatly accelerated under Xi.

6.2 Division at the Top: the SCIO/SIIO, and Propaganda Department

Perhaps due to the necessity of interfacing with the booming Internet sector in China’s capital, the resources of Beijing municipal actors outstripped equivalent capabilities at the central level. Until 2011 (and arguably, until 2013), the central state lacked any functional analog for the Internet and social media to the CPD’s broad role in regulating newspapers. Nevertheless, a designated institution in charge of regulating “Internet content” did exist: the State Council Information Office (SCIO), a.k.a. Office of Foreign Propaganda (OFP).

6.2.1 The SCIO/OFP

In contrast to the well-defined roles of the Internet Management Office and Internet police

⁴⁵Interview #42, BJ, 3/24/15. As an example of this office’s power, it was the body that sent out the directive to Internet companies in March, 2015 ordering Web portals to remove the controversial air pollution documentary *Under the Dome*. I discuss this incident below. See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/03/minitrue-clamping-dome/>.

at the Beijing municipal level, leaders initially placed central authority over regulating “Internet content” in the hands of the OFP, which is “one and the same” with the SCIO (Brady, 2008).⁴⁶ Although the OFP’s primary mandate is foreign propaganda, the Internet was still put under its portfolio despite the fact that the Chinese Internet is heavily domestically oriented (Chinese netizens primarily visit domestic websites). However, this awkward situation was ameliorated by the establishment of an Internet Affairs Bureau within OFP/SCIO to specifically monitor Internet content. While OFP/SCIO and its Internet bureau have enormous authority under the State Council’s direct leadership, like the Beijing Internet Management Office it suffered from the drawback that its formal responsibilities and oversight relation to other central-level agencies were poorly defined. Nonetheless, the OFP/SCIO would frequently send out both broad Internet policy directives, and specific censorship bans on matters of national importance, while leaving to lower-level authorities less critical ‘hot topics’ or more specific follow-up instructions.⁴⁷

In 2011, the Internet bureau of the OFP/SCIO was broken off into a new agency, the State Internet Information Office (SIIO). This office, later given expanded authority as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), built on the bureaucratic lineage of OFP/SCIO to become the linchpin of re-centralized censorship. Before considering the SIIO/CAC’s post-reform powers, however, the next sections examines one final actor in its pre-reform state: the Central Propaganda Department (CPD).

6.2.2 The Pre-reform Central Propaganda Department (CPD)

As the Party’s key media control institution, the Central Propaganda Department might be expected to be leading the charge to “seize the commanding heights” of social media, as the CPD has with newspapers, radio and TV. On this topic, several interviewees consistently repeated two points: 1) top-level propaganda officials and the Party leadership were enthusiastically committed to using social media, but 2) they were “behind”, out of touch, or lacked Internet experts.⁴⁸ Indeed, respondents cited a host of issues with the CPD’s approach to the Internet prior to (and even during) reform. One explained that in his view, a major problem was the Department’s persistence in applying traditional ‘broadcasting’ propaganda techniques to the Internet, even though it is a more user-centric medium.⁴⁹ Another issue was response speed;

⁴⁶This was another instance of *yi men hang, liang kuai paizi*.

⁴⁷Interview #9, BJ, 9/29/14.

⁴⁸Interviews: #10, BJ, 10/2/14; #20, BJ, 11/20/14; #23, BJ, 12/5/14; #48, BJ, 4/16/15; #49, BJ, 4/22/15.

⁴⁹Interview #12, BJ, 10/16/14.

the CPD simply “couldn’t keep up” during *Weibo’s* first two years (2009-10), a time in which the pace of stories broken via the Internet accelerated rapidly.⁵⁰

While such issues certainly affected the CPD’s ability to adapt, a larger barrier was structural: the CPD has no direct regulatory authority over Internet companies.⁵¹ This matters because although the Department’s clout with companies is enormous, the CPD does not (and likely cannot) micromanage the major Internet companies; it is used to having its orders obeyed with print media and not very good at ‘following up’ on deletion requests in the much more chaotic environment of social media. Even before 2011, the CPD had officials who concurrently held government posts in agencies, like OFP/SCIO, that could issue clear, binding orders and had the resources to monitor their implementation. Thus, while the Department could often indirectly influence Internet censorship, it had to rely on intermediaries.⁵² Although this partly reflects the principle that the CPD should not duplicate other state agencies’ regulatory functions (Brady, 2008), it may also reflect the fact that the CPD is simply not well suited to managing Internet content.⁵³

The CPD’s lack of direct action contrasts sharply with the Beijing Internet Management Office. The latter’s local-level innovativeness became especially apparent under the tenure of Lu Wei, who as head of the Beijing Propaganda Department oversaw both the Internet Management Office’s development, and the enlisting, according to Lu’s own statement, of “60,000” Internet propaganda workers on the Beijing government’s payroll and “two million” employed in propaganda off-payroll.⁵⁴ Perhaps not coincidentally, Xi Jinping picked Lu in 2013 to head the CAC and to spearhead Internet regulatory reform.

6.3 Analysis: Adequately Reactive, Inadequately Proactive

The above descriptions represent the state of China’s censorship system in early 2011. Figure

⁵⁰Interview #36, (via Skype while in Shenzhen), 3/6/15.

⁵¹Interview #15, BJ, 11/5/14.

⁵²One high-ranking Internet company employee who dealt with government censors noted that in all his years, he had never received an order from the CPD. Interview #16, BJ, 11/12/14. Also relevant is Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

⁵³Interviews: #16, BJ, 11/12/14; #31, HK, 2/4/15; #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

⁵⁴On its face, this number seems fantastic as it implies that roughly one out of every ten Beijing residents (city population 20 million) is engaged in online propaganda work. However, the South China Morning Post claimed to verify this number with a call to Beijing Internet Information Office. Lu gave the figure at a “conference attended by propaganda department heads in the city” on January 17, 2013. See <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1131287/about-10pc-beijing-residents-work-propaganda-services>. Additionally, one interviewee arrived at a similar number by explaining that Lu designated 4-5 propaganda liaisons within each *shiye jigou* (city services unit) in the Beijing City government, of which there are around 20,000. This would put the total at around 80,000-100,000, close to Lu’s first figure. Interview #57, SH, 6/17/16.

1 depicts the authority relations among this system's various components. While this system was far simpler and more centralized than bureaucratic structures in other policy areas (see Mertha 2005; 2008), companies were still answerable to multiple entities for both discrete censorship orders and broader policy. For example, the Beijing Internet Management Office, and the Beijing Internet Police (PSB) could both issue orders for companies to delete content – yet neither reported directly to the other, and while the OFP/SCIO outranked these municipal-level actors, pre-reform it did not have a direct supervisory relation (called “leadership relations”, *lingdao guanxi*) with either one.⁵⁵ This fragmentation made life more complicated for Internet companies in deciding whose orders to follow: one company insider characterized the situation as “a mess”.⁵⁶ Another Vice-President level insider who dealt directly with censorship described a system in constant flux that “changed every few months.”⁵⁷ Still another consequence of fragmentation was to increase opportunities for corruption, as local officials fearing online exposure would pay Internet company employees to delete posts.⁵⁸

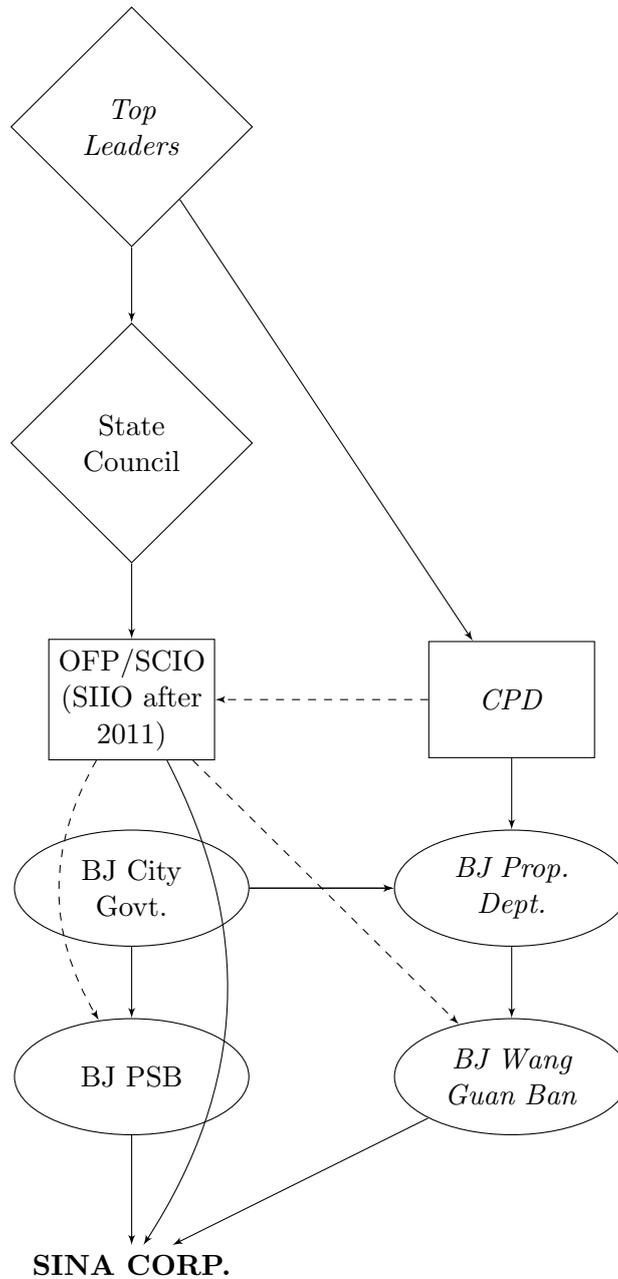
⁵⁵For simplicity's sake, the schematic excludes other somewhat-relevant actors such as the Culture Ministry, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). These actors matter in regulating particular aspects of the Internet. However, I did not include them in the analysis due to their minimal roles in day-to-day regulation of online blog posts and news articles which are the subject of this analysis.

⁵⁶Interview #39, BJ, 3/17/15.

⁵⁷Interview #7, BJ, 9/25/14. The interviewee made this comment in September, 2014, suggesting that even after the reforms, some inter-bureaucratic conflict remains. Of course, this does not mean that no effective re-centralization or streamlining has taken place.

⁵⁸Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

Figure 1: The Chinese Social Media Censorship System Prior to Reform



Note: Diamond = leadership pinnacle; Rectangle = central level government agencies and Party organs; Oval = provincial (Beijing municipal) level. Solid lines = binding authority; dashed lines = influence, but no *de jure* authority. Regular text = government; Italics = Party organ.

Yet while the system suffered from numerous weaknesses, it was still robust enough that on priority topics, top-level officials or their Beijing-level subordinates could still order Sina and other companies to delete posts within minutes or hours. The system thus worked partly through redundancy – on some level it did not matter which entity issued the order as long as companies obeyed it. This system was very good at reacting to undesired news or trending topics for two reasons: first, the number of major companies to regulate was small and they

had clear incentives to comply, and second, the right agencies – especially the Beijing Internet Management Office, with support from the Internet police – were in place to give, monitor, and follow up on orders. However, due to fragmentation and a lack of central leadership, the system was poor in two other aspects: maintaining censorship discipline during day-to-day (non-emergency) events, and combining censorship with positive propaganda. The turning point of 2011-12 then laid bare this incapacity and provided momentum for further reform.

7 Reform and Restructuring (2011-)

Leaders' efforts at reform did not coalesce immediately after the Wenzhou incident. Rather, most major reforms had to await completion of the 18th Party Congress in November, 2012 and the transition to Xi's leadership. One notable exception was the upgrading in rank of the SCIO Internet Affairs Bureau to become a separate office reporting directly to the State Council: the State Internet Information Office, or SIIO (*guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi*), in May 2011. While such a move gave the former bureau increased prestige and autonomy, this step still fell short of establishing a true "Internet czar" to oversee China's Internet-relevant ministries; the Xinhua news release indicated that the new office would direct "online content management", "oversee government propaganda", and listed several other responsibilities (e.g. the very tasks that were then scattered across other ministries and agencies). The announcement left unclear whether the SIIO would have leadership relations with these to-be-subordinated ministries, or only "professional consultative relations" (*yewu guanxi*), which would mean the SIIO could not issue binding orders to them.⁵⁹

Additionally, leaders made sporadic attempts at actually implementing long-discussed policy initiatives even before the Congress, using existing structures. In December, 2011, the Beijing PSB, Internet Information Office (Internet Management Office), and the local branch of China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology jointly announced that they were ordering companies with microblogs registered in Beijing to require users to register under their real names – information that would be checked against police databases.⁶⁰ The order also included rules intended to enforce language in the 2010 State Secrets law on "posting and duplicating

⁵⁹ "China creates new agency for patrolling the Internet", The New York Times, 5/4/2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/asia/05china.html>

⁶⁰ "Beijing imposes new rules on social networking sites", The New York Times, 12/16/2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/17/world/asia/beijing-imposes-new-rules-on-social-networking-sites.html?ref=technology>

illegal content, including information that leaks state secrets, damages national security and interests, [or] instigates ethnic resentment, discrimination or illegal rallies that disrupt social order.”⁶¹ By April 2012, however, authorities ceased attempting to implement the new rule after heavy pushback from companies.

The above two examples illustrate that the challenges facing the Party’s attempts to co-opt rather than crudely suppress social media were not a question of intent. Rather, they were a product of a lack of strong central authority and inter-bureaucratic coordination. After the 18th Party Congress, the leadership under Xi addressed this with a two-step maneuver: a) creating a new high-level Party group for overseeing Internet policy and linking it to an elevated SIIO, and b) marginalizing central-level propaganda officials, especially the CPD.

7.1 China’s “Internet Czar”: the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization and Cyberspace Administration of China

Since major reforms in 2013-14, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) – which is the English name for a joint party/state organ variously referred to as the General Office of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization (*zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu bangongshi*) and the State Internet Information Office (SIIO, see above) – has become the undisputed “head honcho” of Internet regulatory organs at the central level. As is evident from retaining the SIIO label, the office is a direct continuation of the SIIO established in 2011. Through its association as the General Office of a form of supra-bureaucratic oversight committees called “leadership small groups” (*lingdao xiaozu*) used by the top leadership to exert control over all ministries, the CAC now unambiguously outranks a host of subordinate ministries involved in Internet regulation, and all equivalent municipal/provincial level bodies, including in Beijing. That is, it is truly *national* in scope. As is the case with similar party/state central level organs, part of the CAC’s power stems precisely from its dual status.⁶² As the officially designated state organ in charge of coordinating and where necessary, ordering around ministries such as the Ministry of Public Security (more specifically, municipal-level “Internet police”), the CAC enjoys broad authority to set Internet policy under the direction of its leadership small group. Its responsibilities are sweeping and include regulating Internet content, e-commerce, e-finance, cybersecurity and encryption, and combating online crime,

⁶¹Xinhua, 12/16/2011. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/201112/16/c_131310381.htm

⁶²Yet another example of *yi men hang, liang kuai paizi*.

rumors, and pornography. Prior to the CAC's establishment, at the central level nearly all of these policy areas had been claimed by other ministries; for example, the MIIT and PSBs had laid claim to cybersecurity issues, while the Ministry of Culture claimed to be in charge of online anti-pornography campaigns. These ministries are still broadly represented in the new leadership small group, which has representation for nearly all policy areas remotely associated with cyberspace. This leading group was established about a year into Xi Jinping's term, in November, 2013, a key session in which the new leadership announced wide-sweeping reform plans in numerous policy areas. Both the group, and its general office can thus be viewed as Xi's attempt to re-centralize authority over a relatively new and evolving sphere, the Internet, for which the new leadership viewed the existing ministry division of labor as muddled and inadequate.

Both substantively and formally, the CAC differs from existing Internet regulatory agencies. It has been described by various reports as having a "start-up" culture in which employees are among the central government's most likely to "work overtime." It also has "one of the youngest average employee ages of any central government agency, at 37.8 years."⁶³ Prior to July 2016, its head was Lu Wei, who is not a Politburo or even Central Committee member – a curious lack of rank for the head of such a powerful new agency. Lu's background instead reflects the combination of political reliability, industry knowledge, and policy expertise. The first characteristic is evident from his many years at Xinhua News Agency, while the latter two could stem from his time overseeing the Beijing Propaganda Department, and therefore frequent interactions with Beijing Internet giants. Indeed, various interviewees emphasized both aspects of Lu's background: he is "a propaganda guy",⁶⁴ but also "very savvy" and has been willing to meet with tech company illuminati ranging from famous entrepreneur and microblogger Pan Shiyi, to Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg.⁶⁵

Lu's somewhat unconventional background for an official having attained his current rank belied his informal influence as CAC head: he frequently reported directly to President Xi.⁶⁶ His three titles during his tenure shed further light on the CAC's dual party/government nature – one observer listed them, "in order of importance", as 1) Vice Director of Propaganda, 2) Head

⁶³Source: Council on Foreign Relations Net Politics blog. <http://blogs.cfr.org/cyber/2016/07/13/leadership-change-at-chinese-internet-regulator/>. Original report from Sina.com: http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2015-10-19/doc-ifxiuyea9678570.shtml?mc_cid=0f90a2f284&mc_eid=697690bc64.

⁶⁴Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁶⁵Pan Shiyi is CEO of SOHO China, and an outspoken public figure on social and environmental issues.

⁶⁶Statement by Sunxian Tang at Workshop #80 of the 2014 Internet Governance Forum in Istanbul, Turkey. Later substantiated by Interview #54, who said that Lu reported "once weekly" to Xi.

of the General Office of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization, and 3) Director of the SIO.⁶⁷ The first title shows that during his tenure, Lu was formally integrated into the CPD, and propaganda system generally. However, in an unexpected twist, Lu was replaced in June 2016 by CAC Vice-Director Xu Lin, who is considered a ‘rising star’ and had previously served on Shanghai’s municipal Standing Committee while Xi was Party Secretary there.⁶⁸ While the reasons for the switch remain unclear, Xu (like Lu) is viewed to fit two criteria believed to be Xi’s priorities: political loyalty, and a talent for innovative online propaganda. Whether Xu will continue Lu’s proactive engagement style remains to be seen.

Regardless of who heads it, the CAC on paper is clearly a powerful regulatory body. But what about in practice? How successful has the CAC been both in enforcing its will over other ministries and the Internet giants? On this point, while interviewee responses varied, overall they left little doubt that the CAC has truly become China’s “Internet czar”, answerable only to Xi himself.⁶⁹ Some interviewees did clarify, however, that the CAC was not meant to supersede the functions of existing ministries, but rather to serve as a coordinating body and final authority.⁷⁰ The CAC has also not displaced the role of the Beijing Internet Management Office in issuing the most censorship orders to Beijing companies; the center delegates day to day management to the Beijing level, although the CAC doubtless retains residual influence in the municipal government given that many of its staff were formerly city propaganda officials.⁷¹

Nonetheless, the CAC has helped Party leaders to centralize the bureaucracy.⁷² To some extent, this has in fact meant the transfer of responsibilities for monitoring censorable topics and being the one to give Internet companies the order. One striking example concerns so-called “collective mass incidents” (*qunti shijian*). While King, Pan and Roberts (2013) identified the Internet police as responsible for censorship implementation (p. 1), one interviewee who was a high-ranking editor at a Party newspaper told me that on mass incidents it was the CAC that actually issued the order, saying that the PSB’s authority was now limited to narrower security matters.⁷³ Such an observation would be consistent with top leaders’ growing concern

⁶⁷Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁶⁸It would be premature to assume that Xi was unsatisfied with Lu’s performance or that his high-level career is over, as Lu retained his title as Vice Director of the CPD.

⁶⁹Interviews: #16, BJ, 11/12/14; #20, BJ, 11/20/14; #39, BJ, 3/17/15; #44, BJ, 4/3/15; #47, BJ, 4/14/15. A follow-up trip in June 2016 was more conclusive, with a high-profile interviewee (#54) describing Lu Wei as “the king’s man” and stating that he reported weekly to Xi. The interview occurred prior to Lu’s replacement by then Vice-Director Xu Lin.

⁷⁰Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

⁷¹Interview #37, GZ, 3/9/15.

⁷²Interviews: #2, BJ, 9/10/14; #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁷³Interview #20, BJ, 11/20/14.

about online collective action, particularly on microblogs, and a desire to re-centralize related censorship decisions. Finally, the CAC has largely replaced the PSB in a range of Internet supervision roles although the latter retains a “day to day” enforcement function.⁷⁴ And according to one source the practice of other PSBs calling the Beijing police to ask them to order Internet companies to remove undesired content has ended.⁷⁵

7.2 The Marginalization of the Central Propaganda Department

The CAC’s attempts to assert control have not come without struggle against other agencies. In particular, multiple interviewees cited examples of tensions that exist between the CAC and CPD. One interviewee interpreted this clash as Xi’s attempt (as he has done elsewhere in the bureaucracy) to place his own people within the CPD.⁷⁶ Another former Beijing journalist noted that Xi “was not very satisfied” with the CPD’s lack of adaptation to new media, and pointed to a recent publicity stunt of Xi being made to visit a local dumpling shop in person and pay with cash himself as the sort of social media-savvy maneuver backed by Xi’s people but opposed (to that journalist’s knowledge) by the CPD.⁷⁷ Another interviewee viewed this conflict in terms of factions, with Jiang Zemin and Liu Yunshan having backed current director Liu Qibao and other CPD officials’ careers.⁷⁸ Still another considered Xi’s elevation of outsider Lu Wei to have set up a clash between the CAC and CPD.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, given the opaqueness of the process and the recency of still-unfolding reform efforts, we have no way of confirming the exact degree of tensions that exist between the CAC and CPD, but one interviewee did relate convincingly that the former (specifically, Lu Wei) has had his way on at least one important occasion: the decision to allow the air pollution documentary *Under the Dome* to be aired online at a politically sensitive time just before China’s National People’s Congress in late February 2015. The film caused a political stir and hundreds of millions of views as several online video sites promoted it, but was censored after only one week. My source claimed that Lu Wei personally viewed the film prior to granting permission and supported it, with the CPD in opposition.⁸⁰ Lu won out, and the film was allowed to be

⁷⁴Interview #56, BJ, 6/14/16

⁷⁵Interview #56, BJ, 6/14/16

⁷⁶Interview #41, BJ, 3/24/15

⁷⁷Interviews (same subject): #21, BJ, 11/27/14; #57, SH, 6/17/16

⁷⁸Interview #54, BJ, 6/8/16

⁷⁹Interview #41, BJ, 3/24/15

⁸⁰Interview #54, BJ, 6/8/16. This source knows someone who worked on the film crew. While to protect the interviewee’s confidentiality I cannot provide further details, and one must always be cautious when relying on a sole source, I consider the information highly credible.

shown until public commentary about the documentary began to stray far beyond the issue of air pollution and (in leaders' eyes) into more dangerous territory. That the film was aired at all could be viewed as a victory for Lu, although the CPD may have gained support after online discussion got out of bounds. However, in one final piece of evidence supporting Xi's alleged opposition to the CPD, it was chastised by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Xi's signature tool of his anti-corruption campaign, for "weak points like new media."⁸¹ While this criticism could be interpreted as part of Xi's overall attempt to ensure political loyalty by requiring officials to demonstrate adherence to his preferred ideological formulations, it could also be viewed as his genuine attempt to insert people who are both loyal, and savvier in using social media than the old propaganda guard.

These anecdotes individually are not conclusive, but together raise the possibility of Xi favoring the CAC at the CPD's expense. That said, one should not overstate the case since evidence also exists that the two agencies collaborate closely. One respondent referred to the relation between the two as "two signboards, one center of authority."⁸² Another key aspect is that the CAC itself is largely staffed with propaganda cadres, albeit relatively young and Internet-savvy ones; this could be viewed as Lu's and Xi's attempt to keep the CAC politically important by importing propaganda officials from Beijing municipality, while cutting out older or less savvy cadres from the CPD.⁸³ Although available evidence does not permit an unambiguous reading of clear intent on Xi's part to entirely exclude the CPD from Internet leadership, it clearly has lost influence.

7.3 Analysis: Bureaucratic Winners and Losers in the Xi Era

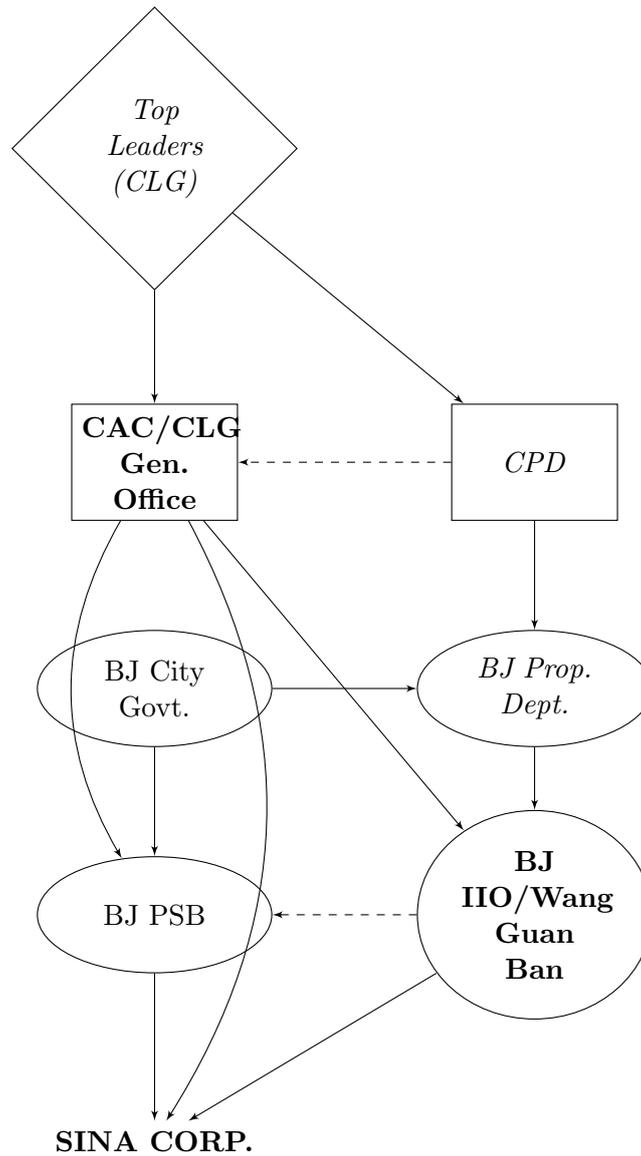
Figure 2 below summarizes the new Internet authority relations since recent reforms. Where in Figure 1 both horizontal relationships among Beijing municipal actors, and vertical ones with their central-level superiors were unclear, here the CAC has unambiguous authority in all Internet-related matters over all other central and municipal agencies, while the Beijing IIO also has authority over Beijing agencies. The CPD, while exercising nominal authority over the entire state Internet system as a Party body, does not oversee this system *de facto*, having been superseded by the Central Leading Group and CAC.

⁸¹Source: Washington Post, June 9, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/09/chinas-communist-party-wants-to-turn-up-the-volume-on-propaganda/>

⁸²Interview #37, GZ, 3/9/15.

⁸³Interview #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

Figure 2: The Chinese Social Media Censorship System Post-reform



Note: Diamond = leadership pinnacle; Rectangle = central level government agencies and Party organs; Oval = provincial (Beijing municipal) level. Solid lines = binding authority; dashed lines = influence, but no *de jure* authority. Regular text = government; Italics = Party organ. Bold text = government *and* Party organ.

The establishment of this CLG is also consistent with the general trend of Xi using leadership small groups to circumvent bureaucratic resistance and centralize power in his own hands, ostensibly to push through anti-corruption and other difficult reforms (see Naughton 2015). These reforms have generated many potential benefits for the central state, of which two deserve note. First, the bureaucratic restructuring has nicely complemented Xi’s increasing emphasis on ‘rule according to law’ (*yifa zhiguo*), a phrase that in China could imply either actual legislative action, or rule through regulatory and administrative strengthening, provided these non-legal codes provide the Internet companies some measure of fairness and predictability in dealing with

the government. That said, since in China the implementation of regulations ultimately rests on personal authority at higher levels, central-level agencies that want to be effective must enjoy the legitimacy afforded by the Party's very top leaders throwing their weight behind the reform initiative. The CAC has both, and thus is well-positioned to serve as "Internet czar" while doing so "according to law." Second, the new central-level structures complement rather than displace expertise at the provincial/municipal level; indeed, they empower this level. The CAC is able to focus on broad policy efforts and "campaigns to clean up the Web", while trusting day-to-day order-giving to the Beijing Internet Management Office/IIO, and enforcement of 'security'-relevant regulations to the Internet police.

8 Conclusion and Implications

Although the full extent of media and Internet system reforms under Xi Jinping has not yet fully manifested at the time of writing, two observations are clear: 1) space for online commentators is as restricted as it has ever been since social media's emergence in China; and 2) ongoing instances of swift and decisive censorship of topics the leadership deems harmful to its interests – the rapid silencing of mainland online support for Hong Kong demonstrators during the 2014 Occupy movement is one example – suggest that leaders' ability to "get what they want, and get it fast" regarding censorship implementation is stronger than ever.⁸⁴ In addition to a fierce 2013 crackdown on leading bloggers, the campaign has also affected censorship implementers themselves – both the companies, and government agents – as top officials sought to combat the phenomena of paid post deletions and what they saw as an excessive emphasis on market-driven 'hot topic' promotion at the expense of political rectitude. Employees at Sina were questioned by police, and some senior officials came under investigation.⁸⁵ Even CAC officials themselves were not immune, as some came under investigation for corruption.⁸⁶ Such efforts to clean up and reform the bureaucracy, then, have been combined with a concerted show of will by top leaders to remove unfavorable social media content: to "strike hard against rumors" (*daji yaoyan*), clean up pornography, and most recently, to "spread positive energy" – a phrase which one interviewee viewed as epitomizing Xi's clean Internet campaign.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Interviews: #15, BJ, 11/5/14; #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

⁸⁵Interview #21, BJ, 11/27/14. See also "Sina faces suspension over lack of censorship." People's Daily Online, 4/11/2015.

⁸⁶Xinhua, 1/21/15. http://www.hn.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/21/c_1114079452.htm

⁸⁷Interview #27, HK, 1/16/15.

8.1 Alternative Explanations

This paper has advanced three main claims that purport to explain China's success in ever-more robust censorship in the 2010s: leader beliefs about information control, a symbiotic state-company relationship, and a particular strategy of creating and elevating a new specialized agency (the Central Leading Group and CAC) to overcome resistance from entrenched existing agencies. Since I argue that the first two are necessary conditions, the implication for comparative analysis is that states lacking either should not have highly nuanced censorship programs. The Chinese case suggests that leader understandings of the value of highly responsive and flexible censorship of the sort seen during the *Under the Dome* documentary are contingent upon their pre-existing beliefs, and depend on their prior experiences with media control. Second, states lacking strong domestic Internet sectors that are beholden to the state should not be able to implement complex censorship programs.⁸⁸

In contrast, testing the final claim about the specific reform/centralization strategy pursued by Xi is less straightforward, and requires weighing multiple alternative explanations of which I consider three here. The first alternative is that Xi's *leadership style* and *personal beliefs* have been responsible for tightly centralized control over the Internet bureaucracy (as well as other areas). This explanation differs from the above claim about leader beliefs in that it tends to attribute events to Xi's own background and beliefs about the danger of ideological weakening rather than CCP elites' collective understanding of the information control imperative. One major problem with this account is that it cannot explain why a major statement about "seizing the ideological battlefield" would be issued in 2011 rather than after Xi's November 2012 ascension. Second, Xi's practice of establishing a new central leading group to circumvent resistance is a tried-and-true technique that generations of Chinese leaders have practiced in other policy areas. While Xi may or may not be unique in the extent to which he has relied on his own personal networks to appoint subordinates to key positions, such networking did not obviate his necessity to build new institutions (the CAC) to supplant existing ones rather than remaking them.

A second alternative concerns the claim that leaders after 2011 had less to do with regulating the Internet *per se* than reining in those with the loudest mouthpieces online: journalists, media outlets, and prominent bloggers. In other words, while the Internet companies may have

⁸⁸I realize that this claim risks over-determining the Chinese case as few other authoritarian states are sizable or wealthy enough to have large domestic Internet sectors. That said, a few potential comparative examples remain: Russia, Iran, and possibly some of the larger Gulf states.

ostensibly been regulatory targets in this story, they were ultimately just intermediaries, with the real targets prominent voices who opposed Xi's program or indeed voiced anything that portrayed the Party or his reforms in a negative light. This story, however, raises the question why Xi or his associates saw the need for any institutional re-configuration or the elevation of the CAC in the first place. If control over people rather than Internet technology and the industry was really what mattered, why not just work through existing institutions like the police, and propaganda department? Of course, Xi in fact has made use of *both* existing and new institutions, with the police playing an active enforcement role in intimidating and arresting bloggers and propaganda departments creating a general ideological climate of pressure on dissenting voices. That such means have also been used, however, cannot explain the specific bureaucratic configuration we in fact observe.

A final alternative concerns the possibility that technological change, namely the rise of social media platforms as the Internet's most dynamic forum yet during the late 2000s and early 2010s, might have simply made online space a much easier regulatory target than was previously the case. In this account, while leaders ultimately took a few years (as have leaders in other countries and society overall) to grasp the power of new online forms like microblogs, once they did, these spaces proved easy to regulate because they were centrally administered by a single Internet company, and because they aggregated user-generated content into a single well-structured format, making it easy to monitor.⁸⁹ The implication here is that the complex and flexible nature of China's Internet bureaucracy should be irrelevant and thus other, less sophisticated countries should be able to replicate China's success. To be sure, the technology argument has a point in that concentration of online commentary and news into a few sites makes the 2010s Internet an easier policy area to regulate than many others. However, this argument by itself again cannot explain why leaders would see the need for extensive bureaucratic restructuring, and runs counter to numerous empirical observations: for example, the financially costly presence (in terms of salaries) of many "in-house" Internet police inside major companies like Sina. In sum, the technological change argument does play a role, but is far from accounting for the major bureaucratic re-shaping observed since 2011.

⁸⁹The corollary is that traditional blogs, bulletin boards and websites were *difficult* regulatory targets because of their diffuseness.

8.2 Implications and Future Research

The findings here have implications both for the study of Chinese politics, and comparatively. First, they call into question whether fragmented authoritarianism is an appropriate framework for analyzing the Chinese Internet bureaucracy, particularly in Beijing municipality and at the central level. To be sure, the proponents of this framework have never claimed it works equally well in all policy areas, and it does not constitute a complete ‘theory’ of the Chinese (or any) bureaucratic system. But the fact that the framework does not seem to fit well for Internet regulation is notable and admits of at least two possible explanations. First, as suggested above, the Internet has become consolidated enough that its structure is very amenable to streamlined, centralized regulation. While this explanation has some merit, a more likely possibility is that President Xi is making considerable efforts to overcome fragmentation by concentrating power at the top in his own hands (through the central leading groups) and by relying on a network of trusted, personally chosen subordinates to circumvent bureaucratic interests. This does not mean he will come anywhere close to succeeding – a large degree of fragmentation is likely endemic to bureaucracies in massive countries – but he may progress much further than his predecessors. In this sense, the Internet policy area serves as a ‘cutting edge’ example of just how far Xi can go in his centralization campaign. It remains to be seen whether such control is a product of Xi himself or will be transferable to whomever (eventually) succeeds him, thus allowing CCP elites to sustain robust and nuanced online information control far into the future.

Finally, the findings both help to delineate cases for comparative analysis, and direct inquiry for examples outside China. The paper’s first two claims regarding longstanding elite beliefs and the presence of a vibrant domestic Internet sector help justify why only a small subset of authoritarian states are ‘comparable enough’ to China with respect to online information control. However, the paper’s most important contribution is to suggest that researchers should look at what I term “traditional” versus “new” Internet regulators in these countries. “Traditional” regulators include the police and security agencies, and various propaganda authorities, while “new” ones refer to specialized agencies specifically established to head Internet regulation – various information technology ministries may also be included provided they deal with Internet content as well as infrastructure and technical standards. I argue that security, and propaganda agencies are (for very different reasons) generally poorly equipped to implement nuanced censorship policies that allow precise and rapid variation in what is censored across specific online topics, and for using censorship as a means to complement state propaganda

efforts. Comparative work can further these factors and the implications for the flexibility and robustness of states' censorship regimes.

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