

Chapter Three

Seizing *Weibo*'s "Commanding Heights" Through Bureaucratic Re-centralization

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1 Introduction

"The processes [in China] through which large-scale energy projects are decided reveal that the fragmented, segmented, and stratified structure of the state promotes a system of negotiation, bargaining, and the seeking of consensus among affected bureaucracies. The policy process in this sphere is disjointed, protracted, and incremental." – Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes*, p. 3

Almost two decades after going to print, Lieberthal and Oksenberg's landmark study of policy making in China remains an important framework for understanding policy outcomes in the world's largest bureaucracy. Although the authors admitted the potentially limited scope of their findings due to selecting a sector (energy) more prone to bureaucratic fragmentation than many others, subsequent work (Lieberthal 1995; Li 1998; Mertha 2005; Brodsgaard 2006), to name just a few contributions, has since validated and expanded the bureaucratic model in other areas. This model, along with the "rational" and "power/factional" politics accounts to which Lieberthal and Oksenberg compare their own theory, is today a fundamental building block of Chinese political analysis. Yet when they first introduced their model, the authors considered neither its applicability to the propaganda system, nor to media management generally – and certainly could not have foreseen the consequences the rise of the Internet, yet alone social media, would have for its appropriate scope.

The question then remains how applicable the bureaucratic model is not only to media policy and censorship, but in an Internet era characterized by the dominance of just a handful of companies located in major cities – an 'easy' regulatory target. To look ahead, some aspects of my findings do resonate closely with the bureaucratic model. For instance, Lieberthal and Oksenberg note that "there is usually a series of iterations in this [policy refinement] process, where the initial *zhengce* [policies] prove inadequate and are supplemented by ever more refined

administrative orders...” (p. 26). Such an iterative, evolutionary process found strong support in my interviewees’ descriptions of leaders’ management of *Weibo* as an ‘experiment’ from 2009-11. Similarly, the authors note that “the emergence of a critical problem [e.g. a crisis or ‘shock’] may capture the attention of the top leaders and force decisions to be made” (p. 30). This project’s analysis of Internet *Xitong* (bureaucratic system) reform similarly stresses the vital exogenous importance of social media’s rapid development in grabbing top leaders’ attention and spurring policy reform.

Yet in many other respects, Lieberthal and Oksenberg’s characterization of the “fragmented, segmented, and stratified structure of the state” simply does not work well for Internet regulation, and especially for attempts to regulate companies like Sina, Tencent, and Baidu that operate market-leading social media services.¹ Of course, given the central importance of complex bureaucratic layering to implementation as well as policymaking in nearly all policy areas, caution and the provision of detailed evidence are warranted in making such a claim – the burden of proof should be on researchers to show not only *that* such regulation is far more unitary and top-down than elsewhere, but *how* and *why* the normal conflicts to which other policies are captive do not apply to the Internet.

In this chapter, I build off the theoretical statements in Chapter 2 to present evidence that frames a response in terms both of leader intentions to exercise tighter control over the Internet bureaucracy and resolve existing conflicts, and their capabilities to do so, i.e. why the Internet *Xitong* prior to the ‘social media shock’ was already moderately effective and conducive to reform, and how reforms greatly accelerated (if not begun) in response to this shock were successful.² I find that overall, the Internet regulatory *Xitong* approximates the rational politics model, in which elites face a governance problem that they view as crucial to both ‘the national interest’ and their own political standing (the two are often interlinked in China, as elsewhere) for which they then pursue an appropriate means-ends solution. Interview evidence

¹The model may work much better for inter-bureaucratic and central-local divisions regarding regulation of smaller websites and bulletin boards (BBS). However, all these have declined in importance not just on the Chinese Web, but globally in recent years, and are not this project’s focus.

²As introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, I define the ‘social media shock’ as the rapid surge in users on social networking platforms (like Twitter, Facebook, and in China, *Weibo*) that occurred around 2009, and a concomitant spike in *highly visible* political discussion, i.e. in social media as virtual public square. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I am agnostic on whether this shock caused reforms that would not otherwise have taken place, or merely accelerated them. While the latter claim is more tenable, data and research design do not permit addressing social media’s causality.

suggests that while top leaders' specific formulation of the problem differs somewhat from how it is presented in Chapter 2's abstract language, the overall idea of strategic censorship receives strong support: in 2011, leaders wished to further strengthen control so as to make strategic use of social media to improve state-society relations. Moreover, due partially to the Internet sector's unique characteristics as well as the pre-existing presence of just a handful of organs with vested interests in tightly controlling censorship, social media policy has been able to better approximate a rational, unitary Chinese state than just about any other policy area.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. First, I describe the fieldwork methodology and interviewee sample that form the basis for my findings. Second, I consider evidence that shows Chinese leaders' clear intention to "seize the commanding heights" of the Internet and especially social media from around 2011 onward, a resolve potentially spurred though not caused by the events of the Arab Spring and surging domestic social media activity surrounding breaking news events. Third, I draw on interview evidence to analyze leaders' management and re-shaping of the censorship *Xitong* divided into two phases: *Weibo* as policy experiment (2009-12), and re-centralization and tightened control (2011-14 and onward, with the two phases overlapping in 2011-12). Last, I evaluate the outcome of the re-centralization process and the main alternative explanation: the ascendancy of President Xi Jinping in late 2012.

1.1 Data and Method

This project's primary data source is over 50 interviews I conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Hong Kong from 2014-15 over seven months of fieldwork. The three mainland sites (with Beijing the most important) are home to nearly all of China's Internet giants.³ Hong Kong was included as it is home to a number of journalists and communications scholars who study mainland Internet censorship. Interviewees fell into one of three major categories: Internet company insiders, journalists, or media- and Internet-oriented academics. Due to the sensitive nature of discussing Internet censorship and the restrictive media atmosphere at the time of fieldwork (the first years of Xi's term and a widespread crackdown on media freedom), 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,

³One measure of what makes a company 'giant' is its rank among all Chinese Internet companies by market capitalization. By this measure, Sina ranked #14 in 2009, with a market cap of U.S. \$1.6 billion.

with each citation giving only the interview number (by order conducted), city, and date, with limited background information about the interviewee given only where safe to do so.⁴

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.⁵ Through persistence and frequent follow-ups, I was able to slowly build out the pool until I had reached over 40 individuals by the end of fieldwork.⁶ Due to the political constraints prevalent in 2014-15 – an anti-corruption crackdown led by Xi that heightened fear and paranoia in officials of all ranks, as well as a specific effort underway in late 2014 and early 2015 to ‘rectify’ (*zhenggai*) Internet company behavior, I was unable to speak to relevant government officials.⁷ 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.

Another limitation is that the 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 social media, especially the thinking of

⁴I cite interviews in footnotes by location and date. Location codes: BJ = Beijing, HK = Hong Kong, SZ = Shenzhen, GZ = Guangzhou, SH = Shanghai.

⁵I attribute interviewees' typically limited number of referrals (per interviewee) both to the topic sensitivity of Internet censorship 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.

⁶I interviewed about ten exceptionally valuable participants twice, giving a total of 50 interviews.

⁷Two 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, and a handful of other prospects all declined to be interviewed after learning my specific topic.

leaders serving at the elite level (roughly, members of the CCP Central Committee and above). Regarding the first objective, details about bureaucratic purpose are inter-subjective – by definition mutually agreed upon and widely shared among all insiders in a given community, which in Internet media includes a wide range of professionals: company employees, journalists and academics in addition to officials directly overseeing censorship. 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.

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 secondhand sources and publicly available documents is fraught with uncertainty, and researchers must acknowledge that absent firsthand interviews all conclusions remain tentative, the evidence presented below is still sufficient to establish a general shift in top officials’ thinking about Internet censorship strategy beginning around 2011, but building off previous ideas. This shift was quantitative rather than qualitative. Leaders did not re-invent their approach to social media’s (or previously, the Internet’s) costs and benefits from whole cloth; indeed, the basic objectives of such a regime showed continuity pre- and post-2011 and also across the Hu-Xi transition. Instead, what changed after the social media shock was the intensity and urgency with which leaders, particularly President Xi, sought to reshape the bureaucracy to implement more proactive social media management, a goal which both Hu and Xi openly proclaimed.

2 Chinese Leaders’ Motivation: 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 and street protests, but also the Internet and social media. Any analysis of how Party elites weigh the costs and benefits of allowing online social spaces to flourish must first acknowledge that leaders’ concern about these technologies’ potential both to spur collective action during breaking events, and to effect a longer-term change in popular attitudes toward the regime, is a limiting factor in every related decision they make. For their

part, all groups of interviewees consistently echoed this theme, a finding that 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.⁸ 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.⁹

Officials' view of social media's mobilizing potential therefore shaped their interpretation of the state of the Chinese Internet from its initial growth during the early 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.¹⁰ While such "chaos" persisted throughout the 2000s, in retrospect elites viewed *Weibo's* peak years (2009-12) as particularly disorderly, both in terms of *Weibo* 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 over proposed chemical plants, 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'.¹¹

2.1 *Weibo* 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 (for *Weibo*, Sina Corporation), and the so-called 'Big V' – who as Chapter 2 discusses, are influential microblogging

⁸Interview #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

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

¹⁰Interview #14, BJ, 11/4/14.

¹¹Examples 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.

entrepreneurs, celebrities, lawyers and other public figures with large online followings.¹² Internet companies were held responsible as the ultimate legal responsibility bearers, while prominent 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 (if reactive) choice to treat *Weibo* as an experiment. One foreign correspondent who had been stationed in Beijing during this period argued that officials relied on *Weibo* as a way to measure public opinion; *Weibo* "did their job for them" in taking the (online) public pulse during breaking events.¹³ Another academic interviewee also referred to *Weibo* as 'experiment', while adding that this experiment was "instrumental" rather than reflective of leaders' normative beliefs about a more lively Internet.¹⁴

If leaders viewed some liberalized discourse on *Weibo* as instrumental, however, then to what purpose? Especially during the Hu Jintao administration's latter years, reform-minded leaders came to view rising corruption among local officials as a major threat to the Party's continued rule. Although I lack confirmation from high-level official sources, multiple interviewees mentioned that from leaders' view, one of *Weibo*'s major benefits was to hold local officials in check by providing bottom-up reporting on corruption or other malfeasance.¹⁵ 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 both suppress media coverage of the disaster, and more insidiously, to literally bury the wreckage. Both the media ban and the physical 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.¹⁶

Thus, while officials were clearly concerned about *Weibo*'s detrimental effects as early as

¹²Sina in particular fell into disfavor with the top leadership after becoming too commercialized, promoting 'hot topics' (*remen huati*) to drive Web traffic even as these contained rumors and other undesirable information. Interview #21, BJ, 11/27/14.

¹³Interview #36 (via Skype while in Shenzhen), 3/6/15.

¹⁴Interview #30, HK, 2/3/15.

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

¹⁶Interviews: #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 among my three main interviewee groups.

2009-11, the platform was not entirely without strategic benefit for them during this period, a logic that held even during the post-shock transitional year of 2012. In fact, many interviewees volunteered the idea that in their view, China's leaders were pursuing some variant of strategic signaling.¹⁷ While instances of leaders relaxing social media space for strategic purposes did not end after 2011 – in fact, such cases were arguably more prominent than ever in 2012 and beyond – the Arab Spring and Wenzhou train accident can nonetheless be identified as turning points that led leaders to adjust their formula toward a more restrictive (but not severely repressive) version of strategic censorship.¹⁸ 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 that year.¹⁹ On the one hand, the need to tighten administrative control 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” – in other words, a comprehensive, multi-pronged regulatory system 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, or challenge their ideological hegemony. 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”, to quote the statement's language.

¹⁷All interviewees who volunteered an interpretation of ‘strategic’ or ‘smart’ censorship *without* me prompting them with my own theoretical priors are cited here (including cases where interviewees did not reference an overall strategy, but used one or more specific breaking incidents 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.

¹⁸Although the language of ‘turning point’ is difficult to prove or falsify, the fact that leaders adopted new language that “Internet development and supervision urgently need to be strengthened and reformed” at the Sixth Plenum of the 17th CCP Central Committee, 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.

¹⁹“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. Source: www.cctb.net.

Here, leaders went beyond increasing efforts to restrict the Internet’s negative effects, to cultivating a positive image of the Party online. One interviewee at a major Beijing technology company who regularly dealt with media-relevant officials 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, in particular, 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 threads on spaces like *Weibo* without killing the very dynamism that attracted young, educated demographics to the platform. In short, it required the Party to influence as well as restrain the ‘Big V’ as extra-systemic pundits, and also to train its own commentators.

With this considerable challenge, leaders recognized around 2011 that they were falling short on both negative, and positive means of control. On the negative control side, attempts at giving the Big V some space to editorialize about current events while selectively applying censorship (e.g., using “softer” means of control) had failed in the eyes of many elites.²² The bureaucracy responsible for enforcing censorship was fragmented, with local Public Security Bureaus (particularly in Beijing Municipality) 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 – directed by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) – to adapt to new media. Several

²⁰Interview #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

²¹Interviews: #27, HK, 1/16/15; #28, HK, 1/21/15. While President Xi has arguably 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 (see above).

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.

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 (only exercising *post-hoc* censorship one or more days after the fact),²⁴ and failing to fundamentally 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 the ‘negative’ regulatory practice of outright banning topics or themes (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 – particularly social media spaces such as *Weibo* – thus factored into their resolve to tighten control while preserving strategic censorship’s most useful aspects. In attempting to rein in the ‘Big V’, human flesh searches, and other perceived concerns as well as to more successfully deploy propaganda, leaders found an uncoordinated central bureaucracy that was inadequate to the task. All that said, in grappling with the surge in social media during and after 2011, China’s leaders began from a far stronger position compared with that of many other authoritarian states. Specifically, the presence of mature, vibrant Chinese Internet companies and the concentration of these companies in only two cities – Beijing and Shenzhen – were important prerequisites for leaders’ success. The main factor, however, was the existence in the Chinese case of policy tools ranging from ‘hard’ measures such as new Internet-relevant laws and a clearer online enforcement mandate for state agencies, to ‘soft’ measures, especially the Central Propaganda Department’s role as a central Party organ. This threefold distinction between law, state, and Party with the Party supreme, has also proved extremely useful in understanding leaders’ attempts to harness the Internet. The next section begins an analysis of these factors with a look at China’s domestic Internet sector.

²⁴Interview #10, BJ, 10/2/14.

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

²⁶Interview #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

3 Domestic Internet Companies' Vibrancy (1990s-2011) as Precondition for Strategic Control

The vibrancy and maturity of China's Internet industry contrasts sharply with its one-party state peers, and with developmental autocracies more generally. Such a strong domestic sector, I argue, has been a critical precondition for Chinese leaders' efforts to implement more nuanced control, for two reasons. First and most obviously, absent a strong domestic sector, the Chinese government would not be able to exercise sophisticated control at all; one interviewee at a foreign technology company in Beijing directly stated that the physical location of the thousands of servers that are the engine of large social networking services matters a great deal for government efforts at controlling the data that passes through them.²⁷ Second, the maturity of China's tech sector implies that the industry is well-consolidated into a few large 'giants' offering widely used social networks, just as has been the trend in and elsewhere. One multinational tech company insider noted that it was easier for Beijing to keep tabs on just a few giant companies compared with a more fragmented market.²⁸ Another aspect of this consolidation trend is the agglomeration of major companies in just two locations – Beijing and Shenzhen – which also greatly facilitates monitoring by central authorities.

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 sector come to exist in China, particularly since the state retains substantial ownership (albeit with revenue now very advertising-dependent) in other media areas like television and newspapers? I argue that several factors that existed long prior to 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 'strategic censorship' strategy. One could begin with obvious economic and cultural factors: China's large and increasingly affluent population, high Internet adoption rates, and the presence of Mandarin as cross-regional *lingua franca* (and walling off the sinophone world from more globally mixed language regions like India). Yet equally important

²⁷Interviews: #15, BJ, 11/5/14; #16, BJ, 11/12/14.

²⁸Interview #30, HK, 2/3/15. While social media market consolidation may be a natural economic phenomenon due to economies of scale, network effects, or brand name recognition, strict censorship regulations may also have played a role by forcing less compliant companies out of the market, a possibility noted by Interviewee #30. I discuss this below.

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, known as China's "Silicon Valley". 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.²⁹

Third, while censorship regulations have been onerous and "a major time suck" according to one domestic company source,³⁰ it would be a vast overstatement to assert that they have crippled the sector. For example, while complex licensing procedures exist for a company to be allowed to operate any website, they have been streamlined in recent years, particularly in Beijing.³¹ Internet companies are also skilled at promoting their services' "social good" to the government (not to mention providing surveillance and intelligence information on citizens, a behavior alluded to although not directly evidenced by several interviewees).³² Finally the Chinese tech sector, as elsewhere, has served as a useful 'disruptor' and technological innovator, with Tencent Corporation in particular taking the lead in mobile app innovation.³³ While censorship and regulation do impose a burden on all these activities, they also offer firms in the market the major advantage of protectionism from foreign competition.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 or even the threat of closure, as some central-level officials have a stronger interest in 'the market' over the Party's political goals than others.³⁵ The next section takes up the interests of various bureaucratic actors prior to around 2011.

²⁹Leaked U.S. Embassy Beijing diplomatic cable, July 9, 2009. See <http://www.wikileaks.org/cable/2009/07/09BEIJING2112.html>.

³⁰Interview #1, BJ, 9/9/14.

³¹Interview #40, BJ, 3/20/15.

³²Interview relevant to companies promoting "social good": #6, BJ, 9/23/14. Regarding providing surveillance data, one 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, as well. Interview #47, BJ, 4/14/15.

³³Based on interview with Tencent software developer. Although potentially biased, he was able to provide me with several examples of how Tencent is industry-leading in mobile. Interview #34, GZ, 2/11/15.

³⁴Two interviewees, although explicitly stating that censorship's primary intent was not protectionism, nonetheless admitted that it had that benefit. On the other hand, protectionism is clearly a double-edged sword: while the focus here is primarily on censorship's effect on companies' short-term competitiveness, one interviewee suggested that a lack of foreign competition could well stifle the industry long-term. 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), responsible for regulating a range of audiovisual products in China, "doesn't give a **** about the market." Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

4 State Capabilities and Social Media Regulation ‘Pre-shock’ (1990s-2011)

In reforming the Internet bureaucracy, Chinese leaders did not begin with a blank slate prior to the social media shock. To the contrary and despite major shortcomings, 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 essential pre-existing agencies beginning at the municipal level.

4.1 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 Shenzhen and Guangzhou (both in Guangdong province), and almost none anywhere else.³⁷ Such a situation contrasts markedly to other economic sectors in China, such as steel (dominant in Hebei province but produced throughout the country, or electronics (concentrated in coastal areas, but still under the purview of dozens of municipalities and counties), where a large number of jurisdictions are involved. The fact that the number of lower-level governments is minimal allows the center to both delegate much oversight to the Beijing (and Shenzhen/Guangzhou/Guangdong) 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.

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

The Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB), a.k.a. “the police”, have played and continue to play a vital role as the enforcers of both written Internet laws and regulations, and more sporadically, the political will of Party elites at various levels. While the Beijing PSB is nominally affiliated with the central Ministry of Public Security, in fact it is under the direct leadership of

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

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

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 as they appear on *Weibo*.³⁸

As I discuss later on, this decentralized situation, even prior to the post-2011 reforms, did not preclude the PSB expediently enforcing ‘priority’ censorship orders from the center as well as Beijing municipality during urgent breaking events – fragmentation was not a fundamental barrier to central-level leaders ensuring the quick suppression of destabilizing or embarrassing online voices – but such a situation 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 the events of 2011, central authorities began pushing legal reform in China in an effort to clarify the legitimate 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 complex political interest in regulating online space, according to one interviewee, 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 “dare not” disobey the PSB even though “its

³⁸Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

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

⁴⁰Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

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.

4.1.2 The Beijing Communications Administration under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology

Another key agency in China’s Internet bureaucracy is the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), and its Beijing subordinate, the Beijing Communications Administration (BCA).⁴³ The BCA, along with its parent ministry, plays an important but highly circumscribed role in regulating Internet companies. Specifically, it is responsible for issuing “ICP” (Internet Content Provider) licenses for Web services registered in Beijing, which is a requirement to operate. Among other preconditions, to gain this license, companies must show that they have adequate procedures in place for dealing with censorship orders. This requirement to be licensed just to operate a website – e.g. to gain the state’s approval even before anything has been published online – constitutes a doctrine called “prior restraint” that is unique to China according to one interviewee; no other country has such a doctrine.⁴⁴ The BCA/MIIT are neither involved in day to day censorship oversight, nor in broad political judgment calls concerning whether to censor breaking events or surging social media trends. They are nonetheless an important enforcement tool of last resort for the state, as the BCA/MIIT may revoke an Internet company’s operating license at any time. The MIIT also fulfills various other technical functions instrumental to censorship, including maintaining the “Great Firewall” that makes unwanted foreign websites difficult to view within China. Post-2011, it has continued to be an important piece of the censorship system under the new central supervision of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO).

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.

⁴³The so-called “BCA” is the English name of the *beijingshi tongxin guanli ju*, or “Beijing City Bureau of Telecommunications”, a name that more directly implies its subordinate status under the MIIT.

⁴⁴Interview #15, BJ, 11/5/14.

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

The third and most pivotal of the three offices 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*),⁴⁵ a title that reflects its position in China’s propaganda system. Before 2013, it was a *party*, not state body under the oversight of the Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department – a critical distinction I elaborate on below. In 2013, its name was changed to 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 PSB (Internet police), and BCA.

Regardless of its name, this office is *the* office directly responsible for issuing orders to the Internet giants in Beijing, as well as to many other prominent online news portals – to delete unwanted content.⁴⁶ 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 (albeit sometimes defined too broadly), 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 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*).⁴⁷ The reason why 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 (under

⁴⁵Insiders also refer to it as the *wang guan ban*, literally “Internet Management Office” for short, an abbreviation that directly matches its official English name. Foreign reports have continued to refer to it as the “Internet Management Office” even after its 2013 Chinese name change.

⁴⁶Interviews: #9, BJ, 9/29/14; #11, BJ, 10/14/14; #14, BJ, 11/4/14; #21, BJ, 11/27/14.

⁴⁷Interview #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 environmental documentary *Under the Dome*, a film about air pollution in China. I discuss this incident in detail below. See <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/03/minitruer-clamping-dome/>.

the guidance of top leaders) set the general political line, while “state” agencies administer and implement this line – but the Propaganda Departments at various levels (central, provincial and local) are among the most important of all Party organs, given the CCP’s longstanding emphasis on propaganda and ideology. Thus, even though the Internet Management Office is technically a lower-ranking unit than the PSB (and BCA, for that matter), its more direct connection to the central propaganda system means that the PSB and BCA 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, as I discuss below, it had no clear *de facto* central-level superior. Second, the office’s regulatory scope was not well defined, and its authority, through 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 Jintao, and greatly accelerated under Xi Jinping.

4.2 Chaos at the Top: the SCIO/SIIO, and Propaganda Department

Perhaps due to sheer necessity and the Beijing authorities’ prioritization of resources to regulate the booming companies in China’s cyber capital, the maturity and sophistication of Beijing municipal actors (as well as their counterparts in Shenzhen and Guangdong, though possibly to a lesser extent) far 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).

4.2.1 The SCIO/OFP

In contrast to the well-defined roles of the Internet Management Office and Internet police 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).⁴⁸ Although the OFP’s primary mandate is external propaganda, i.e. propaganda aimed at foreign audiences, the Internet was still put under its portfolio despite the fact that the Chinese Internet is heavily domestically oriented in terms of both language (Mandarin) and traffic patterns (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, including news articles and social media posts. While OFP/SCIO and its Internet bureau, under the State Council’s direct leadership and as a ‘brother agency’ to the Central Propaganda Department, has enormous authority, 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.⁴⁹ 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 municipal/provincial authorities less critical online ‘hot topics’ or more specific follow-up instructions.⁵⁰

In 2011, the Internet bureau of the OFP/SCIO was broken off into a new agency, the State Internet Information Office (SIIO). As I discuss below, this office, later given expanded authority as the Cyberspace Administration of China, built on the bureaucratic lineage of OFP/SCIO to become the linchpin of re-centralized censorship.

4.2.2 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 for the Party 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.⁵¹ Indeed, respondents cited a host of issues with the CPD’s approach to the Internet both prior to 2011, and even in the context of systemic reform. One explained that

⁴⁸Due to China’s dual party-government system, a single office is sometimes simultaneously both a Party, and state body, with the only distinction between the two being separate names. This concept is known as *yi men hang, liang kuai paizi* or “one door, two signboards.”

⁴⁹The State Council is China’s highest government executive body, responsible for issuing regulations to enforce laws and policy.

⁵⁰Interview #9, BJ, 9/29/14.

⁵¹Interviews: #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.

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.⁵² Another issue was response speed; 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.⁵³

While such issues surrounding propaganda cadres’ lack of experience and out-of-date paradigms certainly affected the CPD’s ability to adapt, a larger barrier was structural: the CPD has no direct regulatory authority over Internet companies.⁵⁴ This matters because although the Department’s clout with companies is enormous – in the aggregate, company executives cannot afford to alienate propaganda officials – the CPD does not (and perhaps cannot) micro-manage 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.⁵⁵ 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, echoed by several interviewees, that the CPD is simply not well suited to managing Internet content.⁵⁶

The CPD’s restraint from exercising informal authority contrasts sharply with the Beijing Internet Management Office. The latter’s local-level innovativeness in contrast to the former’s stagnation 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 – clearly a massive human effort regardless of whether one believes Lu’s exact stated figures.⁵⁷ Unsurpris-

⁵²Interview #12, BJ, 10/16/14.

⁵³Interview #36, (via Skype while in Shenzhen), 3/6/15.

⁵⁴Interview #15, BJ, 11/5/14.

⁵⁵One 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.

⁵⁶Interviews: #16, BJ, 11/12/14; #31, HK, 2/4/15; #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

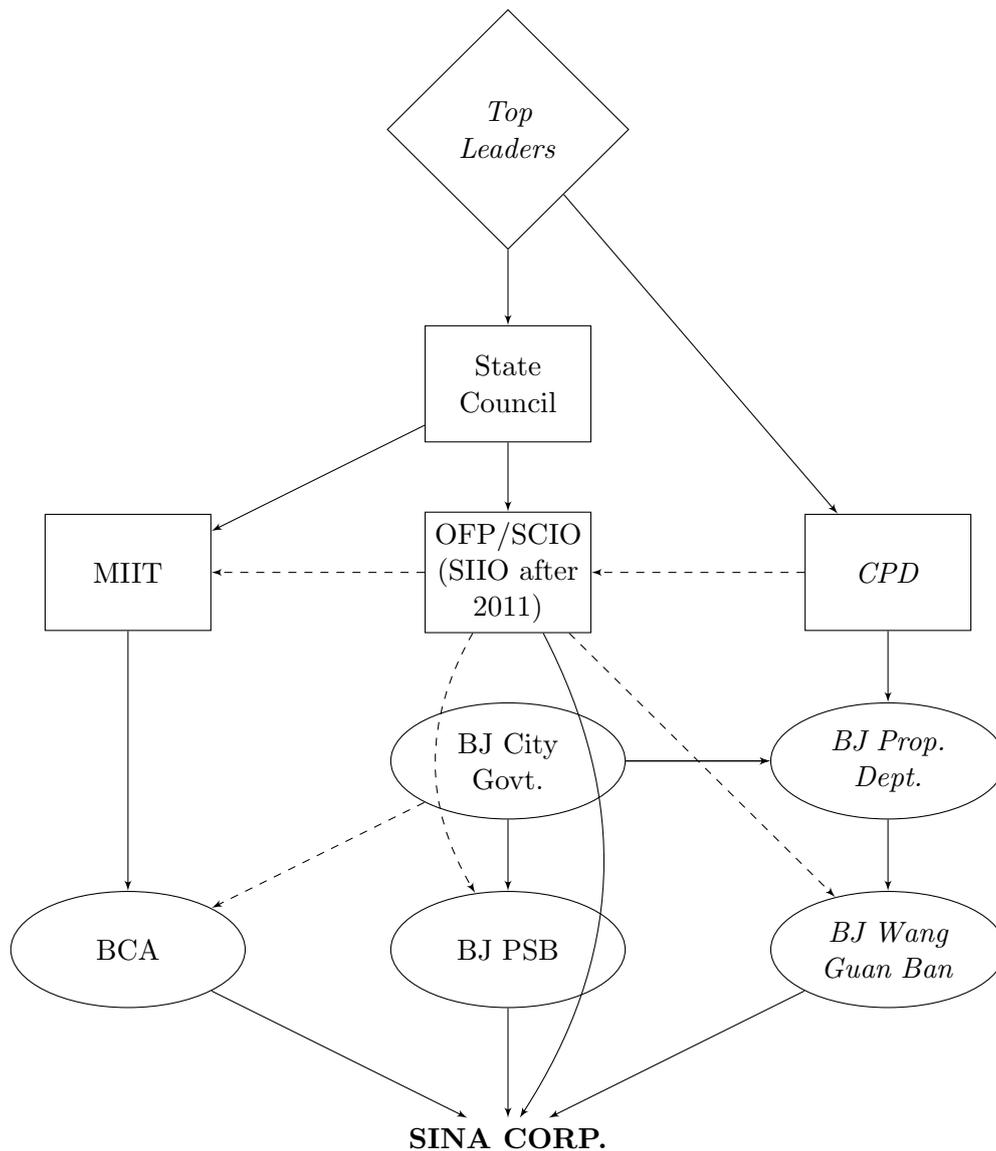
⁵⁷On its face, this number seems fantastic as it implies that roughly one out of every ten Beijing residents (city population 20 million) is engaged in online propaganda work. However, the South China Morning Post claimed

ingly, Xi Jinping picked Lu in 2013 to head the Cyberspace Administration of China and to spearhead Internet regulatory reform, which the next section discusses.

4.3 Analysis: Adequately Reactive, Inadequately Proactive

The above descriptions represent the state of China’s censorship *Xitong* in early 2011. Figure 1 depicts the hierarchical and horizontal relations among this system’s various components:

Figure 1: The Chinese Censorship *Xitong* Prior to Reform



Note: Diamond = leadership pinnacle; Rectangle = central level; Oval = provincial (Beijing municipal) level. Solid lines = binding authority (usually at least semi-formalized); dashed lines = (potentially decisive) influence, but no *de facto* authority to issue orders (the node issuing the arrow sometimes does formally outrank the receiving node). Regular text = government; Italics = Party organ.

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>

While this system, with respect to regulating companies like Sina, is far simpler and more centralized than equivalent *Xitong* in other policy areas (see Mertha 2005; 2008), companies are 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) can both issue orders for companies to delete content – yet neither reports 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.⁵⁸ This fragmentation made life more complicated for Internet companies in deciding whose orders to follow: one company insider characterized the situation as “a mess”.⁵⁹ Another insider described a system in constant flux that “changed every few months.”⁶⁰ Still another consequence of fragmentation was to increase opportunities for corruption, as local officials fearing online exposure would pay Internet company employees used to taking orders from multiple sources to delete posts.⁶¹

Yet while the system suffered from numerous weaknesses, it was still robust enough that on priority topics – collective action or serious harm to the Party’s image – 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 ‘social media shock’ of 2011-12 then laid bare this

⁵⁸For simplicity’s sake, the schematic excludes other somewhat-relevant actors such as the Culture Ministry, and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). These actors matter in regulating particular online products (games in the Culture Ministry’s case, and online videos for SARFT). However, I did not include them in either Figure 1, or the text descriptions due to their minimal roles in day-to-day regulation of online blog posts and news articles which are the subject of this analysis.

⁵⁹Interview #39, BJ, 3/17/15.

⁶⁰Interview #7, BJ, 9/25/14. The interviewee made this comment in September, 2014, suggesting that even after the reforms, some inter-bureaucratic conflict remains. This does not mean, however, that no effective re-centralization or streamlining has taken place, as I argue below.

⁶¹Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

incapacity and provided momentum for further reform.

5 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 Internet Affairs Bureau of the SCIO 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 like MIIT and SARFT). The announcement left unclear whether the SIIO would have leadership relations with these other to-be-subordinated ministries, or only "professional consultative relations" (*yewu guanxi*), which would mean the SIIO could not issue binding orders to them.⁶²

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, Communications Administration (BCA), and Internet Information Office (Internet Management Office) 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.⁶³ The order also included rules intended to enforce language in the 2010 State Secrets law on "posting and duplicating 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."⁶⁴ By April 2012, however, authorities ceased attempting to implement the new rule after heavy pushback from companies.

⁶²"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>

⁶³"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>

⁶⁴Xinhua, 12/16/2011. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/201112/16/c_131310381.htm

The above two examples, as well as leaders' stated objective to "seize the high ground" of the Internet during the 17th Party Congress's Sixth Plenum, illustrate that the challenges facing the Party regarding 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 both 'hard' (state administrative), and 'soft' (propaganda) reforms, as the next section discusses.

5.1 Hard Reform: 'Holding Everything in One Hand': the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization

Since major reforms in 2013-14, the Cyberspace Administration of China – which is the English name for a joint party/state organ variously referred to in Mandarin as the General Office of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization (*zhongyang wanguo 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. As is the case with similar party/state central level organs, part of the CAC's power stems precisely from its dual status.⁶⁵ As the officially designated state organ in charge of coordinating, facilitating, and where necessary, ordering around ministries such as the Ministry of Public Security (more specifically, municipal-level "Internet police"), MIIT and SAPPRT, the CAC enjoys broad legal and administrative authority to set Internet policy under the supervision (and of course, binding 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, rumors, and pornography, among other responsibilities. 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

⁶⁵As was the case with its predecessor the OFP/SCIO, this is an example of "one door, two signboards."

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; for example, People’s Bank of China governor Zhou Xiaochuan has a seat at the table, as does the Minister of Education, Yuan Guiren. 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 economics, finance, social policy and other areas. Both the group, and its general office can thus be viewed as Xi’s attempt to consolidate power over broad policy areas, but also to re-centralize authority over a new phenomenon, the Internet, for which the new leadership viewed the existing ministry division of labor as muddled and inadequate.

One of the CAC’s most revealing aspects is who runs it. Its head is Lu Wei, who is not a Politburo or even a Central Committee member – a curious lack of rank for an official often described as China’s “Internet czar.” Lu’s background instead reflects not the prestigious titles – often, having been the mayor of a major city or a senior ministerial official – often associated with the heads of important supra-ministerial organs, but rather the combination of political reliability, industry savvy, and policy expertise.⁶⁶ The first characteristic is a product of 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”,⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ Lu’s somewhat unconventional background for an official having attained his current rank belies his current influence: though unverified, one source claimed he reports directly to President Xi.⁶⁹ His three titles shed further light on the CAC’s dual party/government nature – one longstanding observer of technology regulation in China listed them, “in order of

⁶⁶In Chinese politics, the tension between politically loyal but technically less capable officials (the “Reds”) and technocrats with perhaps questionable Party bona-fides (the “Experts”) has been a persistent theme. Lu Wei’s background reflects both.

⁶⁷Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁶⁸Pan Shiyi is CEO of SOHO China, and an outspoken public figure on social and environmental issues.

⁶⁹Statement by Sunxian Tang at Workshop #80 of the 2014 Internet Governance Forum in Istanbul, Turkey. Tang self-identified as an official from the “National Cooperation Bureau.” Tang explicitly mentioned the CAC’s name, which as of September was still little-known outside bureaucratic circles. Tang’s specific quote (from the event transcript) was “we have a new ministry, it’s called Cyberspace Administration of China. Directly reported [*sic*] to our President.” While this one source cannot be taken as conclusive that Lu Wei personally reports to Xi, it does support the possibility as the two are linked through the CLG.

importance”, as 1) Vice Director of Propaganda, 2) Head of the General Office of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization, and 3) Director of the SIIO.⁷⁰ The first title shows that Lu is formally (as well as informally) integrated into the Central Propaganda Department, and propaganda Xitong generally.

On paper, the CAC is thus clearly a powerful regulatory body. But what about in practice? How successful has the CAC been both in coordinating (and when necessary, enforcing its will) over both other ministries, and the Internet giants? On this point, while interviewee responses varied, overall they left little doubt that the trend is moving toward the CAC and Lu Wei truly becoming China’s “Internet czar.”⁷¹ Some interviewees did clarify, however, that the CAC was not meant to supersede the functions of existing ministries (a notable example given was the PSB’s role in online policing), but rather to serve as a coordinating body and final authority.⁷² 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 Lu’s time in his former role doubtless means that he retains residual influence in the Beijing PD.⁷³

Nonetheless, the CAC has helped Party leaders to centralize the bureaucracy.⁷⁴ To some extent, this has in fact meant the transfer of certain 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*), which were the focus of a recent prominent article on censorship by Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts (2013). While King, Pan and Roberts 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 SIIO/CAC that actually issued the order, saying that the PSB’s authority was now limited to narrower security matters.⁷⁵ Such an observation would be consistent with top leaders’ growing concern about online collective action, particularly microblogs and a desire to re-centralize related censorship decisions.⁷⁶

⁷⁰Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁷¹Interviews: #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.

⁷²Interview #22, BJ, 12/3/14.

⁷³Interview #37, GZ, 3/9/15.

⁷⁴Interviews: #2, BJ, 9/10/14; #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁷⁵Interview #20, BJ, 11/20/14.

⁷⁶In both theory and practice, the Beijing Internet Management Office (a.k.a. Beijing Internet Information

However, the CAC's attempts to assert control have not come without struggle with respect to certain other actors; in particular, SAPPRT, which has close ties to the CPD, is still struggling for the right to regulate online videos.⁷⁷ A similar clash may also be ongoing at the time of writing between CAC and the CPD itself. Unfortunately, given data limitations and the opaqueness of the process, we have no way to know for sure what the tenor or degree of such a clash might be, but interviews did suggest its existence: one went so far as to say that Xi's empowering of Lu Wei and the CAC set up a clash between the propaganda system, and newly expanded Internet *Xitong*.⁷⁸ Another noted that Xi was not very satisfied with the CPD's adapting to new media.⁷⁹ Yet while certain frictions may exist about the CAC's sweeping claim to regulate all aspects of the Internet, including areas viewed in the CPD as 'propaganda', 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."⁸⁰ Another key aspect is that the CAC itself is largely staffed with propaganda cadres, rather than "experts" drawn from other Internet-relevant ministries; 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.⁸¹ Although available evidence does not permit an unambiguous reading of clear intent on Xi's part to push the central propaganda authorities out of the Internet sphere, what is clear is that the CAC now reigns supreme over Internet policy, including the authority to decide who gets to order Internet companies to delete or block social media content.

5.2 Soft Reform: the Propaganda System's New Role

In light of the CAC's ascendance, then, what role is left for the propaganda system? As already discussed, several interviewees suggested that the CPD, in particular, has been slow to adapt to the Internet era and especially social media and microblogs. Nevertheless, there are

Office, (IIO)) could also issue such an order. However, as the Beijing IIO is subordinate to the SIIO/CAC, the question as to whether, when central-level leaders were "seized" of an incident, they would issue the order themselves or order the Beijing IIO to do so is largely one of appropriate division of labor, not of the Beijing office's ability to differ from the SIIO or resist implementation.

⁷⁷Interview #39, BJ, 3/17/15.

⁷⁸Interview #41, BJ, 3/24/15. This interviewee also mentioned that several recently-appointed propaganda officials are both personally close to Xi, and, as the interviewee put it, "Internet experts."

⁷⁹Interview #21, BJ, 11/27/14.

⁸⁰Interview #37, GZ, 3/9/15.

⁸¹Interview #48, BJ, 4/16/15.

some signs that the recent reforms may actually have cleared the way for propaganda authorities to focus on the ‘positive’ (e.g. messaging) side of Internet control. By delegating ‘negative’ censorship measures – policies regarding acceptable user content, and Internet company responsibilities for maintaining a ‘clean’ online environment – to the CAC and its subordinate agencies, the Party leadership may have dissuaded the CPD from a task it was already ill-suited to perform, and pushed it instead to focus on extending its ideological hegemony into social media. Indeed, the CPD, along with lower-level propaganda departments, is finally showing signs of taking social media seriously; one respondent noted that various propaganda departments had established multiple training institutes (*buxiao gongjian xinwen xueyuan*) nationwide to teach cadres how to use social media, particularly to refute anti-Party rumors and spread ‘positive’ pro-Party posts.⁸²

To be sure, the CPD has still not mastered social media’s more chaotic environment, which demands a more flexible messaging approach than editor-controlled channels. Yet there is now a recognition by top leaders that they cannot control all factual information online, and instead must focus on ‘spinning’ and interpreting breaking news – at least on highly visible events – in ideologically favorable ways. In September, 2013, Lu Wei penned an opinion piece in People’s Daily, following on an important speech by Xi Jinping at the propaganda system’s annual conference the month before, in which he called for “making online public opinion work into the ‘heaviest of heavies’.”⁸³ Both Xi’s speech and Lu’s piece recognized the grave challenge posed by the Internet to Party control over public discourse. Critically, their proposed solution envisioned a key twofold role for propaganda cadres: on the one hand, to directly use new tools such as *Weibo* convincingly, and on the other, to enlist celebrities and other influential online personalities in creating ‘positive’ propaganda.

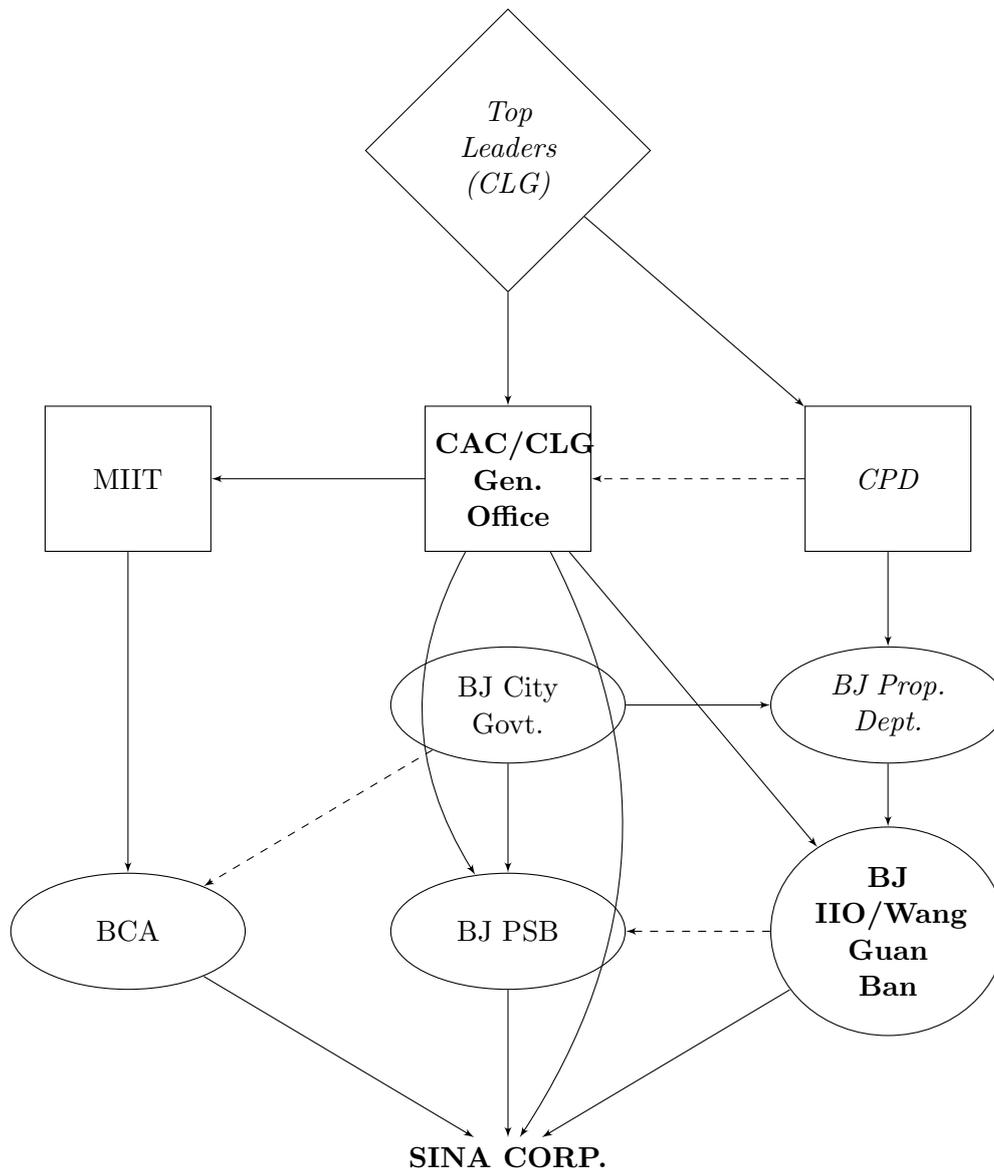
5.3 Analysis: Strong Central Authority, Clearer Division of Labor

The concluding section examines whether these efforts have been successful. First, however, I take an overall look at the restructured Internet *Xitong*, to assess its potential to re-centralize control:

⁸²Interview #4, BJ, 9/16/14.

⁸³Lu Wei’s editorial is available at <http://www.paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2013-09/17/nw.D110000renmrb>. A summary in English of Xi’s speech is available at <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/11/12/xi-jinpings-19-august-speech-revealed-translation/> (the original in Chinese is at <http://www.iask.ca/news/china/2013/1104/231815.html>).

Figure 2: The Chinese Censorship *Xitong* Post-reform



Note: Diamond = leadership pinnacle; Rectangle = central level; Oval = provincial (Beijing municipal) level. Solid lines = binding authority (usually at least semi-formalized); dashed lines = (potentially decisive) influence, but no *de facto* authority to issue orders (the node issuing the arrow sometimes does formally outrank the receiving node). Regular text = government; Italics = Party organ; Bold = government *and* Party organ.

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 *Xitong* as a Party body, does not oversee this system *de facto*; this is because a higher party body, the supra-departmental Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization (CLG), has superseded it and linked up with the CAC. The im-

portance of the CLG cannot be overstated, as it brings all Internet-relevant ministers and the CPD's head, Liu Qibao, in one room under Xi's direction.

The establishment of this CLG is also consistent with the general trend of Xi using leadership small groups to circumvent existing bureaucratic resistance and centralize power in his own hands, ostensibly, of course, to push through anti-corruption and other difficult reforms (see Naughton 2015). These reforms have generated many potential benefits for the state, of which two are worth mentioning. First, the bureaucratic restructuring has nicely complemented Xi's increasing emphasis on 'rule according to law' (*yifa zhiguo*). In the Chinese system, while the country's *de jure* sovereign body to enact laws, the National People's Congress, does matter in codifying and even occasionally influencing the Party's will, quasi-legal administrative regulations issued from state ministries are equally if not more important. Xi's 'rule according to law' can thus be accomplished either through actual legislative action, or through regulations, provided these provide societal actors like the Internet companies some measure of fairness and predictability in dealing with the government. In complex policy areas such as the Internet, if those at the pinnacle of a *Xitong* are not clearly in charge or do not enjoy the legitimacy afforded by the Party's very top leaders throwing their weight behind the reform initiative, any regulations they issue are less likely to be adhered to. 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", to give two examples of its activities, while trusting both day-to-day order-giving and follow-up to the Beijing Internet Management Office/IIO, and enforcement of 'security'-relevant regulations to the Internet police.

Although treating the Chinese state as unitary for analytical purposes is rarely a safe assumption, in principle the new structure shown above comes as close to the ideal of totally centralized power as most any policy area in PRC history. Next, the conclusion considers preliminary evidence to assess whether this structure is actually functioning as intended.

6 Assessing and Explaining CCP Adaptability to Social Media

Although the full extent of media and Internet *Xitong* reforms under Xi Jinping has not yet fully manifested at the time of writing, two observations are clear: 1) space for bloggers, including the ‘Big V’, 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 particular, as the ‘Big V’ created the vast majority of viral political commentary on *Weibo*, the fact that Lu Wei and the CAC were able to effectively silence them during a 2013 crackdown is significant; interviewees noted that Lu relied both on polite conversations with leading bloggers, and highly public examples (such as the arrest of noted investor and commentator Charles Xue on charges of soliciting prostitution) to intimidate the Big V, many of whom were later arrested, fled the country, or went completely silent online according to one source.⁸⁵

The 2013-14 crackdown 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.⁸⁶ Even CAC officials themselves were not immune, as some came under investigation for corruption.⁸⁷ 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 (a recurrent theme in China), and most recently, to “spread positive energy” – a phrase which one interviewee viewed as epitomizing Xi’s clean Internet campaign.⁸⁸ These processes not only directly pressure Internet companies and bloggers to toe the line, but they may also hasten market consolidation, thus reducing the number of companies and making centralized control even eas-

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

⁸⁵Interviews: #22, BJ, 12/3/14; #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁸⁶Interview #21, BJ, 11/27/14. See also “Sina faces suspension over lack of censorship.” People’s Daily Online, 4/11/2015.

⁸⁷Xinhua, 1/21/15. http://www.hn.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/21/c_1114079452.htm

⁸⁸Interview #27, HK, 1/16/15.

ier – a process that one interviewee noted also occurred with Chinese newspapers in the 1990s.⁸⁹

While anecdotal examples of tightening control over social media abound, at this point one might ask whether there is more smoke than fire. Which is actually happening: the appearance, or the reality of social media being under tight control? Although the evidence suggests that tightened control is real and here to stay, a broader reading of leaders' emphasis on dominating public discourse points to them considering appearances as key. If the goal is using censorship to send credible signals to active netizens, then clearly appearances matter more, although in the long run leaders must show that they can actually maintain message hegemony. In the short run, though, Xi and Lu Wei need to have netizens believe that when high-profile topics are visibly censored, their blocking is a product of these leaders' or other very top officials' deliberate choices rather than the whims of subordinate bureaucrats, corruption or *guanxi*, Internet company discretion or other factors.

By this metric, then, the top leadership has appeared quite deliberate since the crackdown in responding to major online events. One example occurred in March, 2015 shortly prior to the National People's Congress. Chai Jing, a former CCTV host, released a documentary titled *Under the Dome* about air pollution's dire effects on Chinese citizens, drawing on her own personal experience and implicitly critiquing both inaction by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the intransigence of polluting enterprises. The documentary was thus implicitly politically sensitive even though Chai deliberately avoided directly attacking officials. Surprisingly and as noted by multiple interviewees (including some at environmental NGOs), the film was not only not censored, but may even have received support from top leaders. For its part, related *Weibo* and other social media chatter went uncensored for days following the film's release, with netizens not just praising it, but according to one interviewee with inside knowledge, raising the idea that the government was behind the whole project given the total lack of censorship.⁹⁰

A week later, however, the government abruptly reversed course and ordered the film banned from social media in addition to domestic search engines, and various news websites. One interpretation that interviewees gave was that the documentary was pulled because discussion grew

⁸⁹Interview #30, HK, 2/3/15.

⁹⁰Interview #46, BJ, 4/8/15.

so ‘hot’ (*re*) that it threatened to displace the NPC’s and the Party’s own agenda, drawing excessive public attention to air pollution instead of the Party’s preferred reform and development goals.⁹¹ While the exact reason for the ban remains unclear, the critical point is that top leaders appearing to be in total control of the media agenda – able to sequentially allow and then ban sensitive social media topics at will – was upheld.

Leaders have made substantial progress in censorship’s negative aspect of information suppression. Yet results on the positive side – to promote the Party’s viewpoint – have been more mixed. A question that I consistently posed to interviewees was whether the Party was attempting to replace the exiled ‘Big V’ with a commentariat of influential Party loyalists, as a semi-official presence on social media that would promote the Party line in creative ways. If interviewees answered affirmatively, I then asked how successful they thought this effort had been so far. Responses varied, but tended in the direction that while top officials ideally would like such a commentariat and had taken tentative steps both to promote the Party’s own voice and to identify favorable bloggers, these individuals and organizations fell far short of the influence the Big V enjoyed at their height.⁹² In this effort, the Party has relied on both establishment media figures (like the leading *Caixin* magazine’s editor Hu Shuli) expanding their presence in social media, and newer grassroots voices like Zhou Xiaoping, a nationalistic blogger singled out for praise by Xi Jinping. Yet despite strong top-level support, the actual influence of these new commenters remains dubious. One interviewee noted that someone like Zhou might resonate in “military” [and by implication, virulent nationalist] circles but would be unlikely to appeal to the *Weibo* mainstream, while another foreign expert bluntly noted that he doubted this new commentariat would succeed.⁹³ What is certain is that thus far, the individuals and organizations that have displaced the Big V have equaled neither their follower counts, nor their popularity.

In sum, while the state since 2011 has made great progress in re-shaping and disciplining the bureaucracy to implement centralized censorship, its success in pushing ‘positive’ propaganda as

⁹¹Interviews: #37, GZ, 3/9/15; #43, BJ, 4/1/15.

⁹²Interviewees that explicitly mentioned that top leaders under Xi had a goal of replacing the Big V with a pro-Party commentariat: #28, HK, 1/21/15 (agrees about ‘positive’ commentariat goal); #31, HK, 2/4/15 (importance of intellectuals on *Weibo*); #37, GZ, 3/9/15 (Party now looking for people ‘within the system’); #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁹³Interviews: #41, BJ, 3/24/15; #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

substitute is far less certain. This, then, raises the question whether enhanced censoring capacity and a desire to “seize the high ground” have displaced the whole logic of “strategic censorship” online in favor of a more traditional Leninist media model. In the concluding chapter, I consider the broader implications of this potential strategic shift for government credibility under Xi. Before that, though, the next section more narrowly addresses this question specifically in light of interviewee evidence.

6.1 Is Control Now ‘Too Tight’? Assessing Selective Censorship’s Prospects Under Enhanced Control

This chapter has primarily focused on the *how* of state control – how have leaders successfully curtailed social media’s negative aspects through censorship and begun to expand a more ‘positive’ (e.g. pro-Party) presence? This matters for the theory advanced in Chapter 2 because effective central control is a prerequisite to be able to speak of ‘strategic’ censorship. That said, while the main focus has been on leaders’ ability to control social media, I have thus far sidestepped what degree of control they have actually chosen to exercise since 2011. The issue is that strategic censorship, as elaborated in the first two chapters, presupposes that leaders’ perceived optimal balance point is somewhere between complete censorship of sensitive events, and total openness (although leaning strongly toward heavier censorship as per Chapter 2’s model). What are the implications both for reading top leaders’ intentions, and for their credibility among China’s wired middle class, however, if leaders in fact begin to push for ever-more restrictive censorship?

The answer, judging from my interviewee sample, is that costs of overly restrictive censorship do exist and are mattering now, not just corroding long-term public trust in the media or the Party. This finding is then consistent with a corollary to the theory of strategic censorship: if we allow that the wired, educated middle class on social media ‘matters’ to Xi and other dominant elites, then they do in fact need to shore up credibility among the wired middle class, and if they block the credibility-generating mechanism described in Chapter 2 from operating by tightening censorship across the board, netizen trust that leaders will carry out reforms will stagnate or decline. While a robust test of this implication must await a survey of relevant netizens, interviewees gave some indications that effects detrimental to the Party are already occurring. One source predicted that political opposition would remain online but go ‘underground’ into

mobile chat services (e.g. WeChat and similar services) or other lower-profile spaces.⁹⁴ This might reduce common knowledge generation and both its protest-coordinating, and credibility-generating effects, but at the same time, might foment a deeper-rooted shift in attitudes toward the regime. A second interviewee noted that the Internet crackdown had led to “increasing cynicism” in society, as savvy observers no longer had any media (official or bloggers) left to believe.⁹⁵ Another potential negative effect concerns the Central Propaganda Department. As it is no longer the center of media regulation after the Internet/social media shift, it has both the opportunity and the challenge to re-focus its mission on indirectly nurturing pro-Party online commentary. Should it fail, however, to use social media to generate the same sort of readership credibility that media marketization did in the 1990s (Stockmann, 2013), this would be a heavy blow to the Party’s propaganda efforts and might broaden erosion of regime support. Such a tendency may be more likely than not, as the CPD appears to have no interest in Internet companies’ commercial success.⁹⁶

6.2 Alternative Explanation: the Leadership Transition

The concluding chapter considers these costs further. For now, it is worth noting that the question remains open whether top leader attempts under Xi to push Party media hegemony into social media space will successfully displace strategic non-censorship as a credibility-generating strategy, or whether allowing some openness is indispensable. Chapter 2 argues that selective non-censorship is necessary, but Xi and Lu may be pursuing a different approach. In the conclusion, I undertake a preliminary attempt to test the cross-temporal validity of strategic censorship using cases from 2014 and 2015, well after the crackdown had begun. Here, though, I first consider the Xi transition as it relates to a more basic claim: that the bureaucratic restructuring in 2011 was responsible for more effective, centralized censorship. The obvious alternative is that Xi’s ascendance and political clout have been critically responsible for reform success in the Internet policy area. The answer matters both theoretically (it would imply that the relationship between bureaucratic structure and policy implementation, at least with respect to the Internet, is heavily dependent on who is in charge), and empirically, since the dissertation’s three quantitative cases are drawn from 2012, prior to Xi’s formal ascent to power. The concern is that as of 2012, the reform process was not advanced enough to allow Chapter 2’s ‘unitary

⁹⁴Interview #14, BJ, 11/4/14.

⁹⁵Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁹⁶Interviews: #22, BJ, 12/3/14; #47, BJ, 4/14/15.

state' assumption to be defensible – that we cannot be sure that as of 2012, censorship decisions taken on major 'hot topics' reflected strategic intent on top leaders' part and not other dynamics. The picture is further muddled by the fact that 2012 was a leadership transition year, suggesting that leader incentives to allow greater Internet openness (or alternatively, their mere lack of attention to censorship) might explain the instances of non-censorship I observe.

While these concerns cannot be entirely refuted, it is crucial to note that since the three case studies focus exclusively on Sina *Weibo*, the most important organ for regulating Sina (the Beijing Internet Management Office) was already in place as of 2011 and played an active role, as did the Beijing PSB. While as identified above, numerous problems and some degree of corruption did exist within the overall censorship system, this is far from saying that top leaders, relying on Beijing-level organs for implementation, were incapable of sending out decisive orders whether to censor in response to priority online breaking events. Moreover, some major reforms, such as the separation of the SIIO from the SCIO, took place in 2011, making the reforms under Xi more of an acceleration of efforts rather than a fundamental shift in direction or a new beginning. Several interviewees supported this interpretation, seeing continuity between late Hu, and early Xi era reforms.⁹⁷ Indeed, by 2012 leaders had already begun to tighten control over the Big V without resorting to the harsher tactics they would pursue later on. Doubtless aware of this political pressure, Sina assigned personal secretaries, (*mishu*) to famous Big V in an attempt both to promote their commercial brand, and to ensure they did not cross political lines.⁹⁸ Additionally, even though major *Xitong* reorganization did not begin until 2013, leaders pursued a series of more restrictive measures in 2011-12 even while leaving some openness for the *Weibo* 'experiment'. For example, in March-April 2012, leaders ordered Sina to turn off *Weibo*'s commenting feature for three days after rumors went viral that disgraced official Bo Xilai was planning to stage a coup.⁹⁹

To be sure, all these tendencies accelerated under Xi. But as a preliminary test of the theory, detailed studies of censorship/non-censorship during key events in 2012, taking into

⁹⁷Interviews: #27, HK, 1/16/15; #29, HK, 1/22/15; #31, HK, 2/4/15; #44, BJ, 4/3/15; #49, BJ, 4/22/15. To be fair, I should note that some interviewees also added that overall reform momentum (across policy areas) was much stronger under Xi, a widely shared perception among China watchers.

⁹⁸Interview #44, BJ, 4/3/15.

⁹⁹"Sina, Tencent shut down commenting on microblogs", The Wall Street Journal, 3/31/2012. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303816504577314400064661814>

account the decision-making context of each case, are a good first step. Although beyond the limits of currently available data, additional cases from 2013 onward can then serve as an even more robust test of strategic censorship under a more unified and disciplined state, allowing the possibility of ruling out that non-censorship in 2012 was merely due to bureaucratic weakness, corruption, or other time-specific factors from this supposedly less ‘strategic’ period. Using a unique dataset collected in 2012 by University of Hong Kong researchers, Chapters 4-6 begin this process by quantitatively examining variation in censorship in the context of three incidents: air pollution surges in Beijing, the Bo Xilai scandal, and nationalist protests over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

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