

The Ethics of Compliance: China's Mandatory Social Credit Surveys

Cambridge Analytica was a landmark example of how large populations could be intentionally influenced through weaponized surveys (Confessore, 2018). But part of the general outrage and disbelief in the Western world was the surreptitious nature and the involvement of international parties in its orchestration (Alvarez, 2020). Just as dangerously but almost opposite in nature, a similar questionnaire-based scheme to control a population was being carried out in China. With implementation happening parallel to the 2016 US election, China's Social Credit System (SCS) uses state-mandated questionnaires designed to enforce ideological compliance through systematic surveillance (Hou and Fu, 2024).

Powering a core part of this system are extensive surveys and personal requests to drive citizen reporting such as Suining County's notorious 168-item questionnaire, ostensibly designed to measure "citizen virtue," (Creemers, 2018). These surveys went beyond assessing the financial reliability associated with credit scores in the western world and probed into personal behaviors with questions ranging from a more expected, "do you pay utility bills on time?" to the more overtly political "Do you criticize the Party online?" This questionnaire was explicitly mandatory with access to essential services like education and transportation tied to compliance. Creemers wrote that enforcement also included the public naming and shaming of "untrustworthy" citizens, fostering self-censorship and conformation among citizens.

Most readers will immediately agree that this feels massively unethical. First, the absence of voluntary participation violates basic research ethics principles outlined in

documents like the Belmont Report (Sims, 2010). In addition to the previously mentioned rewards for participation (access to state benefits), citizens also faced direct punishments for non-compliance such as career penalties (Liang et al., 2018). Secondly, the system's underlying purpose seems to be political repression. Intentionally vague misdemeanors like "spreading rumors" are often used to strike citizens for criticizing government officials (Dai, 2018). Finally, the system institutionalizes discrimination against marginalized groups, with those facing structural economic disadvantages being automatically scored lower due to their income, thereby codifying social inequality as real inequality under the guise of assessing morality (Kostka, 2019).

The social consequences of this system have been profound. A 2019 study found that 62% of respondents engaged in self-censorship online following the implementation of scoring systems, showcasing SCS' effect on free expression (Freedom House, 2019). Scarier still, the system eroded community trust by incentivizing citizens to report on friends and family members for behaviors deemed "untrustworthy," turning personal relationships into tense battlegrounds (The Economist, 2018).

The legality of the system is also interesting as it is technically in violation of China's own regulatory framework. While the country's 2017 Cybersecurity Law ostensibly required "legitimate and necessary" data collection, the social credit surveys routinely violated principles of proportionality and minimization (Lee, 2018). The system also created a parallel punishment structure that operated outside normal judicial

processes, imposing restrictions like travel bans without due process (von Blomberg & Ahl, 2024).

The complicity of industry professionals in developing this system also raises concerns. Major tech firms like Alibaba and Tencent played crucial roles in designing the scoring algorithms despite the ethical implications involved (Donnelly, 2024). The involvement of big tech with the government in this effort was mandated by a combination of nationalist rhetoric and career pressures within China's already tightly controlled tech sector (Lam, 2022).

China's social credit surveys demonstrate how state data collection can manifest as an extensive system of control. Unlike the exploitation seen in cases like Cambridge Analytica that executed a goal of effecting a one time change, SCS utilizes constant surveillance to continually conform a population's ideology. As Western democracies grapple with debates about digital trustworthiness, China's experience serves as a cautionary tale about how such systems can spin out of control and jeopardize individual rights.

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