

February 26, 2018

Dear Hong Kong Research Grant Council and Research Impact Fund Panel Members,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Sarah Cook and I work as a senior research analyst for East Asia at Freedom House, a non-profit research and advocacy organization committed to advancing human rights and democracy around the globe. Among my responsibilities is directing Freedom House's *China Media Bulletin* publication and authoring the China chapter for the annual *Freedom of the Press* report. It is in these capacities that I have had an opportunity to observe the rapid changes in China's media and internet landscape, to make use of the data provided by Weiboscope, and to learn about WeChatscope from Prof. King-Wa Fu.

I am writing now to share my experiences and observations regarding the role that these projects have and could play in advancing anti-censorship efforts in China.

Freedom House has made use of Weiboscope's data for its *China Media Bulletin* project. The bulletin is a monthly digest of news and analysis monitoring press and internet freedom developments related to China. It has been produced sporadically in English since 2010. In 2015, the bulletin was relaunched as a bilingual publication in English and Chinese. Its format was also reconfigured so that each issue would feature an "image of the month," typically a photo of newsworthy significance that had been deleted by censors.

Soon after the project began, I contacted Prof. Fu to see if there was any data from Weiboscope he could share of say, the most censored images from the past month, which could help inform the image selection for that issue. He immediately replied with links and meta-data for the top most rapidly censored popular images and has continued to do so since. The first Weiboscope image we used was a cartoon from September 2015 involving a Winnie the Pooh meme as a representation of President Xi Jinping. We featured it in that issue of the bulletin, in the 2015 annual summary, and on the publication's landing page on Freedom House's website.

Content from Weiboscope—either in the form of the image of the month or other notable examples of censorship cited in the text of the bulletin—has featured regularly in the *China Media Bulletin* and in related social media posts, which themselves typically receive tens of thousands of views. One indication of the potential interest by Chinese netizens in deleted images preserved by Weiboscope involved a cartoon of a rabbit with the statement "I'm Taiwanese" under it in English and Chinese, which was featured in the February 2016 issue. By chance, that issue was posted prominently on the landing page of Freebrowser, a mobile-phone circumvention tool developed by GreatFire.org. As a result, more than 5,000 users clicked on the image and read that issue of the *China Media Bulletin*.

As part of the bulletin's own monitoring and evaluation process, in the summer of 2016, we conducted a reader survey and received a strong response from both English and Chinese subscribers. Although many people inside and outside China are vaguely aware of existing censorship and regularly encounter it, relatively few are fully conscious of the scope of the overall apparatus and of course, of much of the censored content. Nearly 80 percent of both English and Chinese respondents to the survey reported that the bulletin had helped them learn new information they were not aware of before. Over 50 percent reported improved understanding of how censorship works. Importantly, among Chinese bulletin readers who responded to the survey, nearly one-third reported deciding to make a greater effort to seek out uncensored information after reading the bulletin.

These responses point to one of the practical implications of projects like Weiboscope that provide greater transparency about Chinese government censorship—they encourage those who better understand how censorship works to then find ways of accessing uncensored content. This potential impact of Weiboscope is amplified by projects like the *China Media Bulletin* which circulate the deleted content back to people inside China.

I hope this information is helpful and please feel free to contact me with any questions. Sincerely,



Sarah Cook

Senior Research Analyst for East Asia, Freedom House
111 John Street, Floor 8, NY, 10005
(347) 920-0619
cook@freedomhouse.org