Censorship in China

Censorship in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is implemented or mandated by the PRC's ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The government censors content for mainly political reasons, but also to maintain its control over the populace. The Chinese government asserts that it has the legal right to control the Internet's content within their territory and that their censorship rules do not infringe on their citizens' right to free speech.[1] Since Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (*de facto* paramount leader) in 2012, censorship has been "significantly stepped up".[2]

The government maintains censorship over all media capable of reaching a wide audience. This includes television, print media, radio, film, theater, text messaging, instant messaging, video games, literature, and the Internet. Chinese officials have access to uncensored information via an internal document system.

Reporters Without Borders ranks China's freedom of press situation as "very serious", the worst ranking on their five-point scale.[3] In August 2012, the OpenNet Initiative classified Internet censorship in China as "pervasive" in the political and conflict/security areas and "substantial" in the social and Internet tools areas, the two most extensive classifications of the five they use.[4] Freedom House, a US-backed NGO, ranks the Chinese press as "not free", the worst possible ranking, saying that "state control over the news media in China is achieved through a complex combination of party monitoring of news content, legal restrictions on journalists, and financial incentives for self-censorship,"[5] and an increasing practice of "cyber-disappearance" of material written by or about activist bloggers.[6]

Other views suggest that Chinese businesses such as Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba, some of the world's largest internet enterprises, have benefited from the way China blocked international rivals from the domestic market.[7]

Contents

Motives

Most broadly, the purpose of the censorship apparatus is to maintain the stability of the status quo system of governance under the Communist Party.[8] This includes political censorship as well as censorship of content deemed obscene and harmful to public morality, although the latter justification can be used as a means to censor political topics as well.[9] The more specific reasoning and logic of censorship is not publicized by the state, however; scholars outside of China generally tend to take two overarching views of its purpose: first, censorship primarily targets unauthorized criticisms of the party-state; and/or second, censorship primarily targets expression of sentiment that is conducive to organization of collective action (whether or not it is critical of the party-state).[10]

In 2013, Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts published research based on large-scale sampling of posts on a variety of Chinese social media, arguing that the primary motive for censorship is to quash potential for collective action, and not prevent criticism of the government *per se*. Through regular, automated sampling of extant posts, the authors were able to analyze which were deleted over time.[11] While drawing only from Internet-based sources, King et al. argued their data demonstrated that "despite widespread censorship of social media, we find that when the Chinese people write scathing criticisms of their government and its leaders, the probability that their post will be censored does not increase. Instead, we find that the purpose of the censorship program is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected."[12][13]

Further experiments conducted by King et al. (2014) demonstrated and recreated mechanisms of censorship of social media.[14] The authors created social media accounts to publish text online, tracking what was and was not deleted, and additionally obtained social media censorship software used by private corporations to comply with government regulations. King et el. again argued their work offered "rigorous support for the recent hypothesis that criticisms of the state, its leaders, and their policies are published, whereas posts about real-world events with collective action potential are censored."[15]

In 2019, however, Dimitar Gueorguiev and Edmund Malesky published an analysis of the data gathered in King, Pan & Roberts (2013), arguing that the sample included critical posts garnered through state-led consultation campaigns, wherein the Chinese government specifically solicited public comment on certain

proposals, laws and regulations. Gueorguiev and Malesky subsequently concluded that controlling for such condoned criticism, the "strong" thesis of King, Pan & Roberts (2013)—that collective action potential is the primary trigger of censorship, and not a criticism of the government—failed to stand. Rather, while collective action may be a strong, or the strongest, condition for censorship, general criticism is also a major target as well.[16]

Mechanisms

Party and state bodies

Multiple organs of both the Communist Party and the Chinese state exercise various degrees of responsibility for censorship.

The Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party plays a major role in censorship. It issues editorial guidelines for media nationwide, delineating topics that cannot be covered or must be covered in a certain way.[17] In 2013, *The Beijing News*, a Communist Party-run newspaper, noted that the Publicity Department employed over 2 million 'public sentiment analysts' (Chinese: 舆情分析师; pinyin: *yúqíng fēnxī shī*) across the country, who monitor comments on particular topics on the Chinese Internet and compile reports for relevant government or Party bodies if discussion crosses certain thresholds, which in turn decide if and how to respond.[18][19] Additionally, the Cyberspace Administration of China, another Party body, monitors and censors Internet-based media and speech, and issues guidelines to online platforms outlining priorities for controlling discourse.[20]

In 2018, a number of agencies underwent a reorganization designed to strengthen Party control of media.[21] Most of the duties of the General Administration of Press and Publication (previously the State Administration for Press Publishing Radio Film & Television), which licensed and censored all content publishers within China, including in print, audio, and Internet formats, were taken over by the new National Radio and Television Administration under the authority of the State Council.[21] Film and press work was transferred directly to the Publicity Department in the form of the State Film Administration and State Administration of Press and Publication.[22]

Private enterprises

Media outlets usually employ their own monitors to ensure political content does not cross Party lines.[17] For example, WeChat, a popular messaging and social media platform run by Tencent, uses semi-automated methods to monitor content sent between accounts, including images, checking for politically sensitive material, and will block said material from reaching the intended recipient, even if the sending account is non-Chinese. [23] Other companies may contract censorship out to independent firms.[24]

Sina Weibo, the dominant microblogging platform in China, has an internal censorship department that issues its own directives in line with government authority requirements and employs its own censors to monitor content. The Committee to Protect Journalists has published documents it said are from the Weibo censorship department between 2011 and 2014 that detailed the methodology: "... Sina's computer system scans each post using an algorithm designed to identify politically unacceptable content... [p]osts are flagged by the algorithm and forwarded to the department's employees, who decide their fate based on the instructions listed in the censorship logs."[25] This method is consistent with those documented by King, Pan & Roberts (2014) for other websites.[26] Weibo has been reprimanded and forced to limit certain website functions by Chinese authorities as a consequence for failure to adequately censor content.[27]

Subject matter and agenda

Censorship in the PRC encompasses a wide range of subject matter. The motivations behind such censorship are varied; while some are stated outright by the Chinese government itself, others are surmised by observers both inside and outside of the country.

Historical

The Chinese government regulates the creation and distribution of materials regarding Chinese history.[28] Particular emphasis is placed on combatting "historical nihilism". The Communist Party's historical research body, the Central Committee Party History Research Office, has defined historical nihilism as that which "seek[s] to distort the history of modern China's revolution, the CPC and the armed forces under the guise of reevaluating existing narratives", and thus countering such nihilism is "a form of political combat, crucial to the CPC leadership and the security of socialism".[29] In practice, the term is often applied to any narratives that challenge official Communist Party views of historical events.[30] Under Xi Jinping, the government began to censor digitized archival documents that contradict official depictions of history.[31][32]

One example of this is the censorship of historical writings about the Cultural Revolution. Although the Chinese government now officially denounces the Cultural Revolution, it does not allow Chinese citizens to present detailed histories of the suffering and brutality that ordinary people sustained.[33]

Questioning folk-historical stories, such as those of the Five Heroes of Mount Langya, can be a criminally liable offense.[34][35]

Political

The US based Council on Foreign Relations says that unwelcome views may be censored by authorities who exploit the vagueness in laws concerning publication of state secrets. Major media outlets receive guidance from the Chinese Department of Propaganda on what content is politically acceptable.[17] The PRC bans certain content regarding independence movements in Tibet and Taiwan, the religious movement Falun Gong, democracy, the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre of 1989, Maoism, corruption, police brutality, anarchism, gossip, disparity of wealth, and food safety scandals.[36][37]

In the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, the government allegedly issued guidelines to the local media for reporting during the Games: political issues not directly related to the games were to be downplayed and topics such as the Pro-Tibetan independence and East Turkestan movements as well as food safety issues such as "cancer-causing mineral water" were not to be reported on.[38] However, the government claims that such a list does not exist.[39] As the 2008 Chinese milk scandal broke out in September, the Chinese government also denied speculation from western media outlets that their desire for perfect games contributed towards the allegedly delayed recall of contaminated infant formula. This caused deaths and kidney damage in infants.[39][40][41] On 13 February 2009, Li Dongdong, a deputy chief of the General Administration of Press and Publication, announced the introduction of a series of rules and regulations to strengthen oversight and administration of news professionals and reporting activities. The regulations would include a "full database of people who engage in unhealthy professional conduct" who would be excluded from engaging in news reporting and editing work. Although the controls were ostensibly to "resolutely halt fake news", it was criticized by Li Datong, editor at the *China Youth Daily* who was dismissed for criticizing state censorship. Li Datong said "There really is a problem with fake reporting and reporters, but there are already plenty of ways to deal with that." *Reuters* said that although Communist Party's Propaganda Department micro-manages what newspapers and other media do and do not report, the government remains concerned about unrest amid the economic slowdown and the 20th anniversary of the pro-democracy protests in 1989.[42]

In January 2011, Boxun revealed that the Politburo member responsible for the Propaganda Department, Li Changchun, issued instructions for the Chinese media to downplay social tensions on issues such as land prices, political reform and major disasters or incidents, and to ensure reporting does not show the Communist party negatively. The Party warned that the media must "ensure that the party and government do not become the targets or focus of criticism", and any mention of political reforms must reflect the government in a favourable light.[43]

Moral

The Chinese government censors content it considers contrary to Chinese moral and cultural norms. Content censored on moral grounds has included pornography in China,[44] particularly extreme pornography; violence in films;[45] "low-culture" and morally "problematic" performances, such as hip-hop or those featuring visibly tattooed artists and LGBTQ content on television.[46][47]

Pornography has been illegal since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 and is a major target of censorship,[48] but it is still commonly accessible within the country.[49] Chinese media have reported on censors specifically hired by provincial authorities to screen movies confiscated from unlicensed dealers for pornographic content.[49] The government has launched campaigns to crack down pornography to "protect minors and maintain public morality", but pornography consumption within the country has grown steadily since 2000.

Censorship bodies generally treat LGBT content as immoral, and regularly censor non-pornographic depictions of such content in mass media. Positive depictions of same-sex relationships in movies and television have been taken off the air by censors, although according to Human Rights Watch, negative depictions of LGBTQ people are "common and pervasive" as of 2015.[50] Global controversy erupted in 2018 when Mango TV edited out Ireland's Eurovision song because it depicted two men holding hands and dancing together. An LGBT flag waved during an earlier performance by Switzerland that year was also blurred out. The European Broadcasting Union subsequently terminated its relationship with Mango TV's parent company, Hunan Broadcasting System, preventing any further airing of the Eurovision Song Contest in China.[51] Censors had also cut Albania's 2018 performance because of the lead singer's tattoos.[52]

Cultural

China has historically sought to use censorship to protect the country's culture. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s, foreign literature and art forms, religious works and symbols, and even artifacts of ancient Chinese culture were deemed "reactionary" and became targets for destruction by Red Guards.[53]

Although much greater cultural freedom exists in China today, continuing crackdowns on banning foreign cartoons from Chinese prime time TV,[54] and limits on screening for foreign films could be seen as a continuation of cultural-minded censorship. The foreign TV shows and films on internet also become the target of censorship. In July 2017, Bilibili, one of the most popular video sites in China, removed most of American & British TV shows, and all foreign categories like "American drama" to comply with regulations.[55]

In order to limit outside influence on Chinese society, authorities began to restrict the publishing of children's books written by foreign authors in China from early 2017, reducing the number of these kind of books from thousands to hundreds a year.[56]

Religious

The Constitution of China guarantees freedom of religion for citizens, as it does the freedom of speech. In practice, however, there are strict regulations on religious practice and speech. Five state religions are officially recognized: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism; faiths outside of these are illegal, although some are tolerated to varying degrees.[57][58] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for instance, is permitted to maintain a small number of places of worship for expatriates, is forbidden from preaching or proselytizing to Chinese citizens,[59] as are all foreigners.[60] Foreigners caught proselytizing have been arrested and expelled from the country.[61]

A number of religious texts, publications, and materials are banned or have their distributions artificially limited in the PRC, and information concerning the treatment of some religious groups is also tightly controlled. Under Chinese law, a minor is forbidden to receive a religious education of any kind.[62]

The Falun Gong is subject to suppression in China, and virtually all religious texts, publications, and websites relating to the group have been banned, along with information on the imprisonment or torture of followers.[63]

Christian Bibles are allowed to be printed in China but only in limited numbers and through a single press. Their sale is also restricted to officially sanctioned churches, with online sales restricted since at least April 2018.[64][65][66][67] The Chinese government has fined churches for possession of unauthorized editions of the Bible.[68] Other Christian literature is also restricted; in January 2016, five people were arrested for simply "buying and selling officially forbidden Christian devotionals". They were sentenced to 3–7 years in jail.[69]

In 1989, China banned a book titled《性风俗》 *Xing Fengsu* ("Sexual Customs") which insulted Islam and placed its authors under arrest after protests in Lanzhou and Beijing by Chinese Hui Muslims, during which the Chinese police provided protection to the Hui Muslim protesters, and the Chinese government organized public burnings of the book.[70][71][72][73][74][75][76][77][78][79] The Chinese government assisted them and gave into their demands because Hui do not have a separatist movement, unlike the Uyghurs,[80] A collection of brain teasers published in Sichuan in 1993 caused similar effects, and the three editors of the book were sentenced to 2–5 years.[81] Hui Muslim protesters who violently rioted by vandalizing property during the protests against the book were let off by the Chinese government and went unpunished while Uyghur protesters were imprisoned.[82]

In 2007, anticipating the coming "Year of the Pig" in the Chinese calendar, depictions of pigs were banned from CCTV "to avoid conflicts with ethnic minorities".[83] This is believed to refer to China's population of 20 million Muslims (to whom pigs are considered "unclean").

In response to the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting, Chinese state-run media attacked Charlie Hebdo for publishing cartoons insulting Muhammad, with the state-run *Xinhua* advocating limiting freedom of speech, while another newspaper, *Global Times*, said the attack was "payback" for what it characterized as Western colonialism, accusing Charlie Hebdo of trying to incite a clash of civilizations.[84][85]

Economic

In recent years, censorship in China has been accused of being used not only for political protectionism but also for economic protectionism.[86][87][88] Tsinghua University professor Patrick Chovanec has speculated that the Chinese ban on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube may have been done in part to grant a business advantage to the websites' Chinese competitors.[87] Similarly, China has been accused of using a double standard in attacking Google for "obscene" content that is also present on Chinese competitor Baidu.[88][89] The 2D version of the blockbuster film *Avatar* was also pulled from screens in the country; reportedly for taking in too much money and seizing market share from domestic films.[90] Furthermore, the official ban on

most foreign films hardly affect Chinese citizens; such films can easily be acquired in copyright-infringing formats, allowing Chinese to view such films to be financially accessible while keeping their money within the domestic economy.

In February 2007, the website of the French organization Observatoire International des Crises was banned in the PRC after it posted an article on the risks of trading with China.[86] "How do you assess an investment opportunity if no reliable information about social tension, corruption or local trade unions is available? This case of censorship, affecting a very specialised site with solely French-language content, shows the [Chinese] government attaches as much importance to the censorship of economic data as political content," the organization was quoted as saying.[86] In 2016, after a series of policy mishaps in the backdrop of severe economic downturn in the country, regulators, censors and government officials have increased censorship. Officials, regulators and censors acting to stem the flow of money abroad by creating an environment of "zhengnengliang" (positive energy), have warned to commentators whose remarks or projections on the economy contradict optimistic official statements.[91]

Military

Another justification for censorship is that the material could cause military harm. This type of censorship is intended to keep military intelligence secret from enemies or perceived enemies.[92]

Geographic

Private surveying and publication of geographic data (such as a map) without a permit is illegal in China, and geographic coordinates are obfuscated by a government-mandated coordinate system.

Media, communication and education controls

Newspapers

On the twentieth anniversary of the pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, Chinese media came under tremendous pressure from authorities. *Ming Pao* reported on the Publicity Department's "hitherto unimaginable extent" of pressure to screen out any related content. The journal reported two incidents in 2008 which caused official concern, but which could not be proven to be deliberate challenges: *Beijing News* published an image of an injured person being taken to the hospital on 4 June and *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported on unusual weather in Guangdong province with the headline of "4 storms in June," which both journals insisted were due to carelessness. Some newspapers have therefore instructed their editors to refrain from using the numbers '6' and '4' in their reports during this sensitive period. Furthermore, the numbers cannot be used in the headlines lest the Publicity Department disapprove.[93]

A page about the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests on *The Economist* ripped out by China's censorship departments. Publications like *The Economist* are not allowed to be printed within mainland China; thus, China's censors can rip out unwanted contents from every imported publication by hand while clearing customs.

30 journalists and 74 netizens were reportedly imprisoned in China as of September 2014;[94][95] China had "44 journalists in prison, more than any other country."[96]

The Communist Party also often employs teams of writers (Chinese: 写作组; pinyin: *xiězuò zǔ*; lit. 'writing group') to write articles under pseudonyms for the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as other journals.[97] These writing teams are most often employed by the Central Propaganda Department, the Central Organization Department, and the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee.[97] The main purpose of these writing groups is to spread the opinions and political thoughts of the Chinese Communist Party without these ideas being perceived as propaganda.[97] Writing teams consistently use the same pseudonyms to write about specific topics that they specialize in.[97] For example, Ke Jiaoping is the pseudonym for a writing group that publishes articles about technological education and He Zhenhua is the pseudonym for a writing group that publishes articles opposing separatism.[97]

The Communist Party punished foreign journalists by failing to renew their credentials when foreign journalists criticized the Communist Party's policies. On 19 February 2020, China announced the revoking of the press credentials of three Wall Street Journal reporters based in Beijing. China accused the “Wall Street Journal” of failing to apologize for publishing articles that slandered China's efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and failing to investigate and punish those responsible.[98]

Television

Foreign and Hong Kong news broadcasts in mainland China from TVB, CNN International, BBC World Service, and Bloomberg Television are occasionally censored by being "blacked out" during controversial segments. It is reported that CNN has made an arrangement that allowed their signal to pass through a Chinese-controlled satellite. Chinese authorities have been able to censor CNN segments at any time in this way.[99] CNN's broadcasts are not widely available throughout China, but rather only in certain diplomatic compounds, hotels, and apartment blocks.[100]

Numerous content which have been blacked out has included references to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989,[99] the Dalai Lama,[99] the death of Zhao Ziyang,[101] the 2008 Tibetan unrest,[99] the 2008 Chinese milk scandal[102] and negative developments about the Beijing Olympics.[103]

During the Summer Olympics in Beijing all Chinese TV stations were ordered to delay live broadcasts by 10 seconds, a policy that was designed to give censors time to react in case free-Tibet demonstrators or others staged political protests.[104]

In January 2009, during a television report of the inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama, the state-run China Central Television abruptly cut away from its coverage of Obama's address when he spoke of how "earlier generations faced down fascism and communism."[105] Foreign animation is also banned from prime-time viewing hours (5pm to 8 pm) to protect domestic animation production.[106][107]

In September 2020, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced it was "strengthening the content review and onsite supervision" of television media, such as talk shows and period dramas, that explore cultural, historical, and political themes.[108] In 2019, it had already begun censoring popular historical Chinese dramas for not promoting socialist values, such as Story of Yanxi Palace.[109]

Film

China has a large diversity of different foreign films broadcast through the media and sold in markets. China has no motion picture rating system, and films must therefore be deemed suitable by Chinese censors for all audiences to be allowed to screen.[45][110]

For foreign-made films, this sometimes means controversial footage must be cut before such films can play in Chinese cinemas. Examples include the removal of a reference to the Cold War in *Casino Royale*,[111] and the omission of footage containing Chow Yun-fat that "vilifies and humiliates the Chinese" in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*.[112] Prior to the 2008 Summer Olympics, the PRC administration announced that "wronged spirits and violent ghosts, monsters, demons, and other inhuman portrayals" were banned from audio visual content.[113]

Access to the 12,000 movie screens in China is a powerful incentive for film makers, especially those producing material such as *Kung Fu Panda 3* to consult and cooperate with Chinese censors. Taking a Chinese partner, as was done in the case of *Kung Fu Panda 3*, can bypass the quota.[114] Despite this, almost all internationally released foreign films are freely available in Chinese- and English-language versions through the counterfeit trade in DVDs.[113]

All audio visual works dealing with "serious topics" such as the Cultural Revolution must be registered before distribution on the mainland.[115] For example, *The Departed* was not given permission to screen because it suggested that the government intends to use nuclear weapons on Taiwan.[116] Films with sexually explicit themes have also been banned, including *Farewell My Concubine*,[117] *Brokeback Mountain* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*.[118] Warner Brothers never submitted *The Dark Knight* for censors, citing "Cultural sensitivities in some elements of the film" due to the appearance by a Hong Kong singer whose sexually explicit photographs leaked onto the internet.[119] Films by PRC nationals cannot be submitted to foreign film festivals without government approval.[120]

On 16 December 2012, the film *V for Vendetta* was aired unedited on CCTV-6, which raised hopes that China is loosening censorship.[121] However, in August 2014 government officials caused the shutdown of the Beijing Independent Film Festival, an annual event for independent Chinese filmmakers to showcases their latest works. It was understood by the organizers the government was concerned the festival would be used as a forum to criticize the government.[122]

Hollywood producers generally seek to comply with the Chinese government's censorship requirements in a bid to access the country's restricted and lucrative cinema market,[123] with the second-largest box office in the world as of 2016. This includes prioritizing sympathetic portrayals of Chinese characters in movies, such as changing the villains in *Red Dawn* from Chinese to North Koreans.[123] Due to many topics forbidden in China, such as Dalai Lama and Winnie-the-Pooh being involved in the South Park's episode "Band in China", South Park was entirely banned in China after the episode's broadcast.[124] The 2018 film *Christopher Robin*, the new Winnie-the-Pooh movie, was denied a Chinese release.[124]

Literature

China's state-run General Administration of Press and Publication (新闻出版总署) screens all Chinese literature that is intended to be sold on the open market. The GAPP has the legal authority to screen, censor, and ban any print, electronic, or Internet publication in China. Because all publishers in China are required to be licensed by the GAPP, that agency also has the power to deny people the right to publish, and completely shut down any publisher who fails to follow its dictates.[125] Resultingly, the ratio of official-to-unlicensed books is said to be 40:60.[126] According to a report in ZonaEuropa, there are more than 4,000 underground publishing factories around China.[125] In 2008 there was one instance of burning of religious and politically incorrect books by local library officials.[127] The banning of unapproved literature or books that have since fallen out of favor with the Communist Party line continues, though critics claim this spotlight on individual titles only helps fuel booksales.[128][129] Publishing in Hong Kong remains uncensored. Publishers such as New Century Press freely publish books, including lurid fictional accounts, about Chinese officials and

forbidden episodes of Chinese history. Banned material including imported material such as that published by Mirror Books of New York City are sold in bookshops such as "People's Commune bookstore" patronized by shoppers from the mainland.[130]

Music

The album *Chinese Democracy* by American rock band Guns N' Roses is banned in China, reportedly due to supposed criticism in its title track of the government and a reference to the currently persecuted Falun Gong spiritual movement.[131] The government said through a state controlled newspaper that it "turns its spear point on China".[132][133] Also banned is the track "Communist China" by British rock group Japan.

The album *X* by Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue was released as a 10-track edition of the album by EMI Records. The album got three tracks banned due to strict censorship in the People's Republic of China. The tracks that were omitted were "Nu-di-ty", "Speakerphone" and "Like a Drug".[134]

China has historically issued bans to music acts who proclaim support of Tibetan independence or otherwise interact with the Dalai Lama, such as Oasis—which had concerts cancelled after lead singer Noel Gallagher had performed in a concert to benefit the movement, Maroon 5—which had concerts cancelled after a band member made a Twitter post celebrating his 80th birthday, and Lady Gaga—who became the subject of a ban issued by the Publicity Department after having posted an online video of her meeting with him.[135][136]

Internet

Around 53 percent of the People's Republic of China's population had access to the Internet as of 2017.

China's internet censorship is regarded by many as the most pervasive and sophisticated in the world. The system for blocking sites and articles is referred to as "The Great Firewall of China". According to a Harvard study conducted in 2002,[137] at least 18,000 websites were blocked from within the country, and the number is believed to have been growing constantly.[138] Banned sites include YouTube (from March 2009), Facebook (from July 2009),[139] Google services (including Search, Google+, Maps, Docs, Drive, Sites, and Picasa), Twitter, Dropbox, Foursquare, and Flickr.[140][141] Google was planning to launch a censored version of its search engine in China, blocking information about human rights, democracy, religion, and peaceful protest,[142] but it was terminated.[143] Certain search engine terms are blocked as well.

Reporters in the Western media have also suggested that China's internet censorship of foreign websites may also be a means of forcing mainland Chinese users to rely on China's own e-commerce industry, thus self-insulating their economy.[144] In 2011, although China-based users of many Google services such as Google+ did not always find the services entirely blocked, they were nonetheless throttled so that users could be expected to become frustrated with the frequent timeouts and switch to the faster, more reliable services of Chinese competitors.[145] According to BBC, local Chinese businesses such as Baidu, Tencent, and Alibaba, some of the world's largest internet enterprises, benefited from the way China has blocked international rivals from the market, assisting domestic companies.[7]

More recently, under current Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, there has been a big push to improve information technology and use the improved technology as a means to further promote propaganda and the Communist party agenda. This initiative has been successful, and by the end of 2015, almost 700 million Chinese citizens had internet access. However, with this improvement in technological access, there is now much more efficient communication regarding current events and government issues through social media, resulting in broader discussions amongst Chinese netizens on government policies and affairs; the government has implemented rules and preventative measures to counter the spread of negative public opinion

regarding the Communist Party and governmental affairs. For example, Article 246. Section 1 in Criminal Law states that unlawful posts that are shared over 500 times or seen over 5000 times will result in the poster being charged with up to 3 years in prison.[146][147]

The regulation of public opinion was tightened after the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference in August 2013.[148] At the conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping underscored the importance of "ideological work" in strengthening and uniting China; more specifically, he strongly emphasized the need to suppress controversies, "mistaken viewpoints", and rumors on every public platform.[149] Shortly after this conference, a nationwide Internet Cleaning-up Campaign (净网行动) was implemented, during which there was a widespread deletion of blogs containing views deviating from those of the Party.[149] That same month in 2013, the government also made a concerted attack against "Big V's" (verified social media celebrities with large public influence) who had a history of online activism and rumor-mongering.[149]

Yang Qiuyu, Zhou Lubao, and Qin Huo Huo are three "Big V's" that were arrested between 21 and 23 August 2013 on charges of rumormongering and slander.[150] In that same month, Chinese-American investor Charles Xue (Xue Manzi), one of the most popular liberal social commentators on Chinese social media, was also arrested.[151] Three weeks after his arrest, he appeared on CCTV-1 (a Chinese TV channel), confessing that he "irresponsibly posted rumors about political and social issues online," and commending the new internet regulations passed under General Secretary Xi Jinping's administration.[152] These arrests served as an example to the rest of the "Big V's" as well as other Chinese internet users to be careful of what they expressed online; in fact, even five months after these arrests in August, there was a noticeable decrease in the number of posts and discussions from prominent online figures.[147] On popular microblogging site Weibo, opinion leaders decreased their posts by around 40% from the previous year.[153] By 2015, instances of censored posts from popular Weibo accounts included messages that were only mildly critical of the government – for example, the blocking of sarcastic comments in the wake of a widely viewed documentary about urban air pollution in China entitled, *Under the Dome* (Chinese: 穹顶之下; pinyin: *qióng dǐng zhī xià*).[154]

From 2017 onwards, Chinese censors began removing all images of the character Winnie the Pooh in response to the spread of memes comparing General Secretary Xi Jinping to the plump bear, as well as other characters from the works of A.A. Milne, later leading to the film *Christopher Robin* being denied release in China.[155]

The Chinese government also employs people as "black PRs" to remove information from the Internet and criticize those who speak negatively about the government.[146] Network operators are obligated by the Cyberspace Administration to assist the government in monitoring and removing "illegal information" online.[148] Moreover, the Cybersecurity Law that went into effect on 1 June 2017 forces internet providers to identify internet users, facilitating control and monitoring of public expression online.[153]

The State Council has the right to cut off network access or shut down internet access in response to incidents it deems a risk to national security.[148] For example, in response to the 2009 riots in Xinjiang, the Chinese government restricted internet access in the region and shut down the social media platforms Twitter and Fanfou.[146]

Text messaging

According to Reporters without Borders, China has over 2,800 surveillance centers devoted to text messaging. As of early 2010, cell phone users in Shanghai and Beijing risk having their text messaging service cut off if they are found to have sent "illegal or unhealthy" content.[156]

In 2003, during the severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome (SARS) outbreak, a dozen Chinese were reportedly arrested for sending text messages about SARS.[157] Skype reported that it was required to filter messages passing through its service for words like "Falun Gong" and "Dalai Lama" before being allowed to operate in China.[158]

During protests over a proposed chemical plant in Xiamen during the summer of 2007, text messaging was blocked to prevent the rallying of more protesters.[159]

Video games

In 2004, the Ministry of Culture set up a committee to screen imported online video games before they entered the Chinese market. It was stated that games with any of the following violations would be banned from importation:[160]

- Violating basic principles of the Constitution
- Threatening national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity
- Divulging state secrets
- Threatening state security
- Damaging the nation's glory
- Disturbing social order
- Infringing on others' legitimate rights

The State General Administration of Press and Publication and anti-porn and illegal publication offices have also played a role in screening games.[161]

Examples of banned games have included:

- *Hearts of Iron* (for "distorting history and damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity")[162]
- *I.G.I.-2: Covert Strike* (for "intentionally blackening China and the Chinese army's image")[163]
- *Command & Conquer: Generals – Zero Hour* (for "smearing the image of China and the Chinese army")[162]

The historic ban of major video game consoles in the country was lifted in 2014 as part of the establishment of the Shanghai Free-Trade Zone.[164] Consoles had been banned under a rule enacted in 2000 to combat the perceived corrupting influence of video games on young people.[165]

Education

Educational institutions within China have been accused of whitewashing PRC history by downplaying or avoiding mention of controversial historical events such as the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.[166][167]

In 2005, customs officials in China seized a shipment of textbooks intended for a Japanese school because maps in the books depicted mainland China and Taiwan using different colors, implying Taiwan was an independent state.[168]

In a January 2006 issue of *Freezing Point*, a weekly supplement to the *China Youth Daily*, Zhongshan University professor Yuan Weishi published an article entitled "Modernization and History Textbooks" in which he criticized several middle school textbooks used in mainland China.[169][170] In particular, he felt that

depictions in the books of the Second Opium War avoided mention of Chinese diplomatic failures leading up to the war and that depictions of the Boxer Rebellion glossed over atrocities committed by the Boxer rebels. As a result of Yuan's article, *Freezing Point* was temporarily shut down and its editors were fired.[166][171]

New Threads, a website for reporting academic misconduct in China such as plagiarism or fabrication of data, is banned in China.[172]

A new standard world history textbook introduced in Shanghai high schools in 2006 supposedly omits several wars; it mentions Mao Zedong, founder of the PRC, only once.[166]

In a *FRONTLINE* segment, four students from Peking University are seemingly unable to identify the context of the infamous Tank Man photo from the 1989 unrest sparked by Peking University students, though possibly, the students were feigning ignorance so as not to upset the party official who was monitoring the interview with clipboard in hand.[173] The segment implied that the subject is not addressed in Chinese schools.

On 4 June 2007, a person was able to place a small ad in a newspaper in southwest China to commemorate the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests reading "Paying tribute to the strong(-willed) mothers of 4 June victims". The accepting clerk claimed that he was ignorant of the event and believed that 4 June was the date of a mining disaster.[174]

A confidential internal directive widely circulated within the Chinese Communist Party, *Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere* (關於當前意識形態領域情況的通報), prohibiting discussion of seven topics, was issued in May 2013. Included on the list of prohibited topics were: Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, Western conceptions of media independence and civil society, pro-market neo-liberalism, and "nihilist" criticisms of past errors of the party.[175][176]

During the COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China, academic research concerning the origins of the virus was censored.[177]

Historical trends

Cultural Revolution

The goal of the Cultural Revolution was to get rid of the "four olds" ("old customs," "old culture," "old habits," and "old ideas"). If newspapers touched on sensitive topics like these, the journalists were subject to arrests and sometimes violence. Libraries in which there were books containing "offensive literature" would often be burned down. Television was regulated by the government and its goal was to encourage the efforts of chairman Mao Zedong and the Communist Party. Radio was the same way, and played songs such as, "The Great Cultural Revolution is Indeed Good".[178][179]

Under Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping has personally consolidated power and control within the state and party to an extent far greater than his predecessors Hu and Jiang.[180] Accordingly, the intensity and range of censorship in China has increased under his rule.[17] Xi has overseen the increased coordination and consolidation and of censorship authorities, raising their efficiency, and under his leadership censorship practices have tightened.[181]

Xi has also emphasized a country's right to "cyber sovereignty", the ability to manage and govern its cyberspace as it sees fit.[182]

Responses from society

Self-censorship

Although independent from the mainland's legal system and hence censorship laws, some Hong Kong media have been accused of practicing self-censorship in order to exchange for permission to expand their media business into the mainland market and for greater journalistic access in the mainland too.[183][184]

At the launch of a joint report published by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) and "ARTICLE 19" in July 2001, the Chairman of the HKJA said: "More and more newspapers self-censor themselves because they are controlled by either a businessman with close ties to Beijing, or part of a large enterprise, which has financial interests over the border."[185] For example, Robert Kuok, who has business interests all over Asia, has been criticized over the departures of several China desk staff in rapid succession since he acquired the *South China Morning Post*, namely the editorial pages editor Danny Gittings, Beijing correspondent Jasper Becker, and China pages editor Willy Lam. Lam, in particular departed after his reporting had been publicly criticized by Robert Kuok.[185]

After the implementation of the Hong Kong national security law in July 2020, media, publishers, and libraries began censoring content perceived as promoting Hong Kong independence, as well as works by prominent democratic activists.[186] International media outlets like *The New York Times* also withdrew some of its staff from the city in anticipation of greater censorship in Hong Kong.[186][187]

International corporations such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Myspace, Shutterstock, and Yahoo! have voluntarily censored content for Chinese markets in order to be allowed to do business in the country.[188][173][189][190] In October 2008, Canadian research group Citizen Lab released a new report saying TOM's Chinese-language Skype software filtered sensitive words and then logged these, with users' information to a file on computer servers which were insecure.[191] In September 2007, activists in China had already warned about the possibility that TOM's versions have or will have more trojan horse capability.[192] Skype president Josh Silverman said it was "common knowledge" that Tom Online had "established procedures to meet local laws and regulations ... to monitor and block instant messages containing certain words deemed offensive by the Chinese authorities."[191]

Marketing

Publishers and other media in the Western world have sometimes used the "Banned in China" label to market cultural works, with the hope that censored products are seen as more valuable or attractive. The label was also used by Penguin Books to sell Mo Yan's novel *The Garlic Ballads*, which had been pulled from bookshelves because of its themes (anti-government riots) being published so close to a period of actual riots. However, the book was allowed to be sold in China in a few years. Political scientist Richard Curt Kraus criticized Penguin for falsely portraying Mo Yan as a dissident in order to increase his marketability, as well as the underlying assumption that if the United States bans some work, that it must be genuinely obscene, but that if the Chinese government does the same, it is acting on purely political grounds.[193]

On the Internet, people use proxy websites that allow anonymous access to otherwise restricted websites, services, and information.[140] Falun Gong and others have been working in the field of anti-censorship software development.

Circumventing censorship

Chinese citizens frequently use many techniques to circumvent Internet censorship in order to discuss social and political current events on online platforms and gain access to web pages blocked by the Great Firewall of China.

Public relay servers such as virtual private networks (VPNs) and The Onion Router nodes (Tor nodes) are widely used by Chinese netizens in order to visit blocked web pages.[194] Typically, Internet Service Providers can view an internet user's traffic and data; however, virtual private networks connect internet users to a server through an encrypted connection.[195] This prevents Internet Service Providers from being able to access the internet users' IP addresses, data, activity, and physical location.[195] As a result, the internet user can access blocked websites through this external server.[195] VPNs are so widely used by Chinese netizens that many journalists, both within Party-sanctioned media outlets and private media outlets, are instructed by their editors and supervisors to use VPNs in order to access international news.[196]

Chinese netizens also use the method of "tunneling" to access blocked webpages.[197] Tunneling is when information is transmitted using a different communications protocol than the usual.[197] One example of tunneling is if internet user "A" in China emailed internet user "B" in America asking for the contents of a blocked webpage.[197] Internet user "B" could then respond with an email containing the contents of that blocked webpage, allowing internet user "A" to access the censored information.[197] This method can be generalized by Web-page-by-mail services; for example, if an internet user emails web@cnn.com with the URL of a CNN webpage, that internet user will receive an email containing the contents of that specific Webpage.[197]

Mirrored web pages are another way to circumvent Internet censorship by the Great Firewall of China.[197] A web page can be mirrored simply by recreating that page under a different URL.[198] Because of the large scope of the Internet, it becomes near impossible for internet filters to identify and block all of the different mirrors of blocked webpages under their various non-specific URLs, increasing public access to censored information.[197]

Netizens also have methods to express their opinions online without being censored by the government.[199] The primary method is in the form of code words, metaphors, or plays on words.[199] For example, the phrase "Grass Mud Horse" (Cao Ni Ma) is commonly used by netizens as a pun on a homophonous profanity; this phrase has been broadly used to signify a subversive means of broaching topics not permitted by the government, and it has been used by netizens advocating for greater freedom of speech.[199] The rise of online satire and code words used to mock or criticize the government or sociopolitical issues has formed a subculture on the Chinese Internet called "egao", which translates literally into "evil doings" in Chinese.[200] These code words and phrases allow netizens to discuss topics ranging from government corruption to health and environment scandals to everyday society and culture.[201] Through this subculture, Chinese netizens can broach sensitive issues on social media with less risk of government censorship.[200]

Besides Internet censorship, Chinese citizens have devised methods to circumvent censorship of print media as well. As news organizations in China try to move away from the reputation of simply being mouthpieces for Communist party propaganda, they face a difficult challenge of having to report the news objectively while remaining on good terms with the government.[196] Journalists do their best to resist government censorship by maintaining a relatively neutral balance of positive and negative tones in articles, reporting on officials who have already been officially removed from their positions, disparaging the Communist Party as an entity instead of targeting individual officials, and focusing blame on lower-ranking officials.[196] News organizations encourage their journalists to report on more sensitive yet risky articles by promising journalists compensation even if their articles get cut by government officials before publication.[196] Editors also try to ensure job security by continuing to employ a journalist under another position even when told by the Communist Party to fire that journalist for disobeying Party protocol.[196]

See also

- Internet censorship
- Censorship in the United States
- 2013 Southern Weekly incident
- Censorship in Hong Kong
- Freedom of religion in China
- Human rights in China
- Internal media of China
- Overseas censorship of Chinese issues
- Propaganda in China
- Radio jamming in China

- *Silenced: China's Great Wall of Censorship*, a book published in 2006 by Oystein Alme and Morten Vågen

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