



Ideological Control and Social Media

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Abstract

This paper surveys the differing tactics of censorship and propaganda of the US, EU, and China, analyzing the impact that they have over their respective societies. The strategies used by these authorities will not be interpreted in morally absolute terms, but will instead be studied with the purpose of understanding the type of society the regime is striving for. First, the controlling methods employed by China to maintain ideological authority over Weibo will be examined. This will then be contrasted with the limited government involvement in Facebook, which allowed private firms to dictate profit-oriented forms of censorship. Next, the consequences of misinformation and foreign political interference that resulted from this action will be reviewed. The resulting change in strategy by western officials will be introduced, as it will continue to evolve over the next few years.

1 Introduction

Censorship has the ability to shape the culture and form the moral identity of the citizens of a nation. According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, censorship “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” With this in mind, censorship has been carried out for the purpose of maintaining social order or consolidating power under an authority through obstructing the access or production of information. However, with the development of online social media, the barriers between the ability to consume and publish ideas to a large population have been broken down, leading to countries across the world having to rapidly establish new policies toward online expression. While China has seemed to allow small forms of dissent on social media, they have still attempted to censor topics on these services that may be detrimental to the image of the party while also trying to promote a cohesive national culture through nuanced online propaganda. In contrast, most democratic western nations have attempted to leave the social media landscape alone, seeing it as

an opportunity for independent free speech and profit, but have encountered widespread problems due to the absence of state surveillance and regulation.

1.1 The Tool of Social Media

The platform of social media itself is based on the ability for an individual to publish and consume information that is published by other individuals. Considering this freedom of expression, social media can be seen as a tool furthering democratic ideals. It has been found that “social media has helped foster democratic conversation about social and political issues: from the Arab Spring, to Occupy Wall Street movements, and other civil protests” [Badawy et al. \(2018\)](#) across the world. With the ease of individuals to connect with one another on social media, topics that might originate with one individual have the capability to go “viral” extremely quickly, traversing through social networks and reaching a substantial audience in anywhere from a few days to even a few hours. However, with the amount of surplus information available on social media, users are understandably unable to digest everything that is published, thus leading them to be “rationally ignorant” on topics, deciding to “consume information that is easy to access, confirms their beliefs, and is from sources that they have reasons to trust” ([Roberts, 2020](#), 31). Users are naturally going to consume what is put in front of them the most, while not searching out information that is buried or unavailable on their social media feed. Using these ideas, the social media landscape has been able to be utilized by authorities of both national and private interest, which can be seen in the comparison between China's involvement in Weibo and Facebook's development in western democratic countries.

2 China's Control over Weibo

With the explosion of opinions and information available on social media and the internet in general, the Chinese Communist Party had to quickly mobilize its censorship bureaus to issue regulations on the topics that were able to be accessed on the online environment. With departments such as the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology all working separately at first to carry out online regulation and censorship, president Xi Jinping created a new Cyberspace Administration of China, or the CAC, in 2013 for the purpose of “streamlining Internet control” ([Roberts, 2020](#), 107) in 2013. The responsibilities of this administration include internet regulation, online censorship, and digital propaganda ([Roberts, 2020](#), 106), while its creation consolidated power under Xi, allowing him to have a direct decision on what types of online regulation were implemented. This administration covers a broad basis, part of which is the surveillance of China's largest social media service, Weibo.

In accordance with the Communist Party's mission to establish a cohesive Chinese culture and trust in the state, multiple topics are censored from Weibo that may be deemed as dangerous or threatening to the image of the party. For example, one of the blocked words on Weibo, translating to "I have no enemies," relates to a speech written by the Chinese dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winning writer, Liu Xiaobo, who called for mass political and legal reforms in China against the leading Communist Party. Liu read this prepared speech while on trial for these "crimes" and it became famous when it was read again at his Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 2010, which he was absent from as a result of his Chinese imprisonment [Ng \(Ng\)](#). Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the word "I have no enemies" is censored from Weibo because of the effects that could take place if this topic was allowed to go viral on social media. As seen with the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movements, political social media topics that start to trend online can have the potential to develop into widespread protests. Seeing as Liu Xiaobo's ideas and imprisonment were a politically dangerous topic to the leading party, the topic was censored from Weibo in the hope that future protests were not planned and spread on social media, destabilizing the Communist Party's control.

2.1 Limited Dissent

However, despite the mass suppression of certain topics on Weibo, China has allowed some types of political dissent online. According to Han, the Chinese state "has neither the capacity nor the intention to completely shut down the Internet or eliminate all political expression online" ([Han, 2018](#), 103). While it is true that the ability to completely suppress political dissent on social media may be unrealistic because of the ease of individual publishing, it seems as if the Chinese state would not attempt to do this even if they could, due to a predicament that many authoritarian regimes face called the "dictator's dilemma." In imposing and oppressive regimes, the public can be too scared to speak out against the state for fear of punishment, which makes dictators unable to know "whether the population genuinely worships them or worships them because they command such worship" ([Roberts, 2020](#), 24). A lack in policy feedback from a state's citizens would make party leaders unaware of political problems in the government that they would be able to fix, which would prevent much larger issues from developing later on. China's allowance of this minimal dissent enables them to monitor local officials, "ensuring that localities are carrying out central directives and not mistreating citizens" ([Roberts, 2020](#), 24), while also gauging the success of the Communist party in maintaining national pride and culture.

2.2 Propaganda Campaigns

The Chinese state has also mobilized a vast social media propaganda campaign in order to continue to promote the party's ideologies and to counteract the dissent and criticism that may be present on these services. With one of these methods, China has worked with Weibo to certify approximately 14,148 state-run media outlets as verified, official social media accounts (Han, 2018, 104), which portrays the image of a trustworthy source that Weibo recognizes. Since users are overflowed with ideas on social media, they will have to decide which views are most trustworthy and will be much more inclined to accept the views presented on this verified page over the views that may be present on a page not verified by Weibo. With this "trustworthy" state presence on social media, the party is able to respond to any "hot-button issues" that may arise in a quick and effective way, reaching large audiences owing to the fact that some of these pages attract "millions of followers" (Han, 2018, 105).

In addition, the Chinese Communist Party has also employed thousands of workers in order to engage in a social media propaganda technique known as "astroturfing." This tactic attempts to manipulate the public opinion through the portrayal of "grassroots support for a product, policy or even to shore up wider and more genuine support" (Han, 2018, 107). The Chinese state attempts to sway this dominant opinion of the public by employing these internet commentators to engineer "purposeful framing and information input, which in turn influences innocent users' perceptions and their subsequent input" (Han, 2018, 107). The presence of internet commentators online flood the media platform with support for the leading party, creating the illusion that other citizens are simply expressing their honest opinion, boosting the image of the state. A social media user will come across astroturfing comments often on political topics, and, if they are unaware of the state's internet commentating techniques, the user could come to accept that a vast number of citizens believe in the pro-state ideas that are stated. Through these propaganda techniques, China has attempted to promote their official party ideology by making their ideas seem more trustworthy than other bloggers while creating an image of mass support from users throughout social media.

3 Western Response to Facebook

While China has striven to control the social media landscape, most western democratic nations initially saw social media as a form of free expression and best left in the hands of the private market. For the most part, the type of censorship that existed on a certain social media platform was decided by the creators of the site. A year and a half after Facebook, a popular social media platform, was launched, its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, was asked a question during a Harvard lecture, asking if Facebook filters

out content that might relate to underage drinking or nudity. Zuckerberg responded, saying that he felt the social pressures of using one's own name on the site would prevent pornography from being uploaded while underage drinking was removed since parents would "break up all the keg parties really quickly, and that would suck for everyone" [Zuckerberg \(Zuckerberg\)](#). Here, Zuckerberg illustrates the much more relaxed take on social media censorship, for the purpose of social order and cultural development, that was initially taken by western nations and private developers.

3.1 Profit-Oriented Censorship Tactics

This lack of state mandated censorship allowed social media companies to become much more focused on how to make individuals interested in using the platform and how to gain profit off of them. In the case of Facebook, developers designed a way to make the site more appealing for an individual through a form of censorship that became known as personalization algorithms. This censorship, which was for the purpose of consolidating a company's power by growing and retaining their user base, relies "on amassing extensive customer data and predictive algorithms to tailor content generated, in part, by the prior actions of the user" ([Hamilton et al., 2017](#), 140). Then, these algorithms display "content relevant to one's prior interests and activities" on the user's explore page and "filter out content that is not" relevant to their perceived interests ([Hamilton et al., 2017](#), 140).

With this type of social media censorship, users become exposed to primarily the same types of information whenever they are exploring their feed and will naturally not attempt to seek out new types of information, as discussed by Margaret Roberts. In addition to these personalization algorithms, the large data set compiled by Facebook about their users allows marketers to perform "behavioral targeting" and create marketing models that can yield "results that are readily interpretable: a set of distinct behavioral profiles, and combinations of such profiles into individual consumers" ([Trusov et al., 2016](#), 407), which will then be used to create "contextual and personalized advertising" ([Hamilton et al., 2017](#), 139). This personalized ad service has allowed outside companies to purchase Facebook ads, knowing that their product will be put in front of someone who is more susceptible to purchasing it. Through the advertisement service model, Facebook generated a profit of 17.09 billion US dollars in 2015 ([Hamilton et al., 2017](#), 141), which demonstrates the extent in which companies believe in the ability of social media to spread ideas to a large population, paralleling the strategy of the Chinese Communist Party.

3.2 Internal Consequences

However, the lack of state-mandated censorship and regulation of expression on social media platforms in many western countries has raised new pressing issues that these countries must deal with today. Recently, there has been an increase in the amount of accounts promoting terrorist or other violent activity that have been present on Facebook. Over the last few years, it has been found that ISIS has created recruitment pages on Facebook, encouraging others to join their effort and engage in violent acts [Silver and Frier](#) ([Silver and Frier](#)) prompting concern over the ability of terrorist organizations to incite homegrown attacks. In New Zealand, Facebook Live was used to share violence when a gunman used the service “to livestream his attacks on two mosques that killed 50 people” [Ingram and Collins](#) ([Ingram and Collins](#)) causing panic and subsequent outrage over the company’s allowance of such violent material to be published on the site.

Another problem that has arisen from the way that ideas and topics are so easily publishable and shareable on social media is the issue of misinformation, which can develop on social media when users share posts that foster “confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust” ([Del Vicario et al., 2016](#), 554). Misinformation has been aggravated on platforms, such as Facebook, due to personalization algorithms censoring information not relating to one’s interests or beliefs, causing the “formation of homogeneous clusters, i.e., ‘echo chambers’” ([Del Vicario et al., 2016](#), 554-555). With many individuals only being exposed to topics that agree with their interests and viewpoints in these “echo chambers,” along with their natural inclination to be “rationally ignorant,” users have begun to believe that the sources that they have routinely viewed on social media are the most factual. Since there is no fact checking service on social media, there is no way for users to identify what type of information is untrustworthy on their feed. Misinformation has become so pervasive on social media that “it has been listed by the World Economic Forum as one of the main threats to our society” ([Del Vicario et al., 2016](#), 554). With the type of informational filtering and censorship left up to the private developers, content that has become problematic to society has been allowed to develop on platforms such as Facebook, which public officials are just beginning to recognize.

3.3 External Interference Consequences

In western democratic countries, the absence of state directed cultural development and propaganda online has also left a power vacuum in the social media world, allowing other sources to attempt to step in and use propaganda techniques to push an agenda. Public officials were able to uncover a large-scale example of this when a Russian based organization named the Internet Research Agency, or IRA, attempted to influence the

political culture in the United States starting in early 2014. According to the recent report published by the Mueller Investigation, the IRA was based in St. Petersburg, Russia, and used funding from “Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin and companies he controlled” to employ workers to operate “social media accounts and group pages designed to attract U.S. audiences” (Mueller, 2019, 14).

Much like the internet commentators that the Chinese Communist Party would utilize, the IRA attempted to use astroturfing techniques to portray grassroots support with public social media pages, falsely claiming to “be affiliated with U.S. political and grassroots organizations” (Mueller, 2019, 22). These accounts would “pose as anti-immigration groups, Tea Party activists, Black Lives Matter protestors, and other U.S. social and political activists” (Mueller, 2019, 22), using divisive and harsh political language aimed at creating group polarization. Personalization algorithms and the creation of “echo chambers” with misinformation contributed to the success of the IRA, with users who might agree with these types of views being routinely exposed to these accounts. This would cause users to have their partisan ideas affirmed and pushed even more to the extreme with the material included on the IRA’s accounts. Understanding social media’s ability to quickly spread ideas to a large audience, the IRA accounts that Facebook identified on their platform “collectively made 80,000 posts between January 2015 and August 2017” with Facebook estimating that the “IRA reached as many as 126 million persons” (Mueller, 2019, 15). Through these social media accounts, the IRA “organized and promoted political rallies inside the United States” (Mueller, 2019, 29), illustrating the extent in which they were able to remotely influence the political ideology and activity of United States citizens.

In addition to these accounts, the IRA began to use Facebook’s advertising and marketing model to target users whose behavioral patterns exhibited traits that indicated that they might be more susceptible to the agenda that the IRA was trying to push. Some examples of these legally purchased advertisements include depictions of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton with the caption “If one day God lets this liar enter the White House as a president - that day would be a real national tragedy,” while others promoted IRA accounts such as “Black Matters” and hashtags such as #HillaryClintonForPrison2016 or #nohillary2016 (Mueller, 2019, 25). All the tools to perform a massive ideological campaign on social media were available to any properly funded source, and, with the United States not performing rigorous social media surveillance like China, there was no authority present to attempt to create an ideological influence against the IRA’s agenda.

3.4 Western Response

With the amount of issues that have developed in a non-regulated social media environment, western public officials have begun to put pressure on private developers to find

ways to identify and censor information that may be harmful to the public. In response to governmental pressure to remove the ISIS recruitment accounts on Facebook, the platform has issued a ban on accounts that are “nongovernmental organizations that use violence to achieve political, religious, or ideological aims,” while “training its artificial intelligence systems to get better at flagging bad posts” [Silver and Frier](#) ([Silver and Frier](#)). Similarly, Facebook is experiencing pressure to attempt to censor content and ban accounts that speak to white supremacy, “taking down a page used to organize the ‘Unite The Right’ rally in 2017” [Ingram and Collins](#) ([Ingram and Collins](#)).

However, complete suppression of speech on a platform that is founded on providing the ability for freedom of expression is controversial in democratic countries, as hate speech is up for interpretation. In an opinion article on the New York Times, editorial board member Sarah Jeong argues that Facebook would “be glad to stick to a single global standard” [Jeong \(2019\)](#) instead of trying to bend its censorship policies to meet the acceptable criteria of different groups. With European policies being relatively consistent compared to American lawmakers’ fluctuating stance on freedom of speech, Jeong believes that Facebook may impose hate-speech censorship on its American platform based on European laws in the future. With misinformation, Facebook has not fully removed or suppressed posts that may be false since they do not fit into the category of hate speech, but has “proposed a community-driven approach where users can flag false content to correct the newsfeed algorithm” ([Del Vicario et al., 2016](#), 554).

However, this tactic can also run into problems, as users will not be actively searching out and fact-checking posts that agree with their viewpoints because of their tendency for “rational ignorance.” Overall, in light of recent events, western democratic nations are attempting to find ways in which they can regain power over the social media landscape in order that they can more effectively control online speech and are not at the mercy of private or foreign ideological influence.

4 Conclusion

In all, the ability that social media provides in spreading information and ideas have developed into a powerful tool for cultural influence. The shifting tactics that are used by authorities to control the online environment should not be interpreted in morally absolute terms, but are best studied with the purpose of understanding the type of society a regime is striving for.

While limited forms of dissent have been tolerated, China’s censorship and propaganda tactics have enabled the social media environment to not be at a high risk of destabilizing the rule of the Communist Party. Through this, the Chinese state has been able to receive valuable policy feedback while still striving to promote a singular nationalistic culture. However, it can be argued that China’s tight control over the

platform defeats the basis of social media and free individual expression.

On the other end of the spectrum, many western countries have attempted to allow democratic principles on social media to develop on their own, but seem to be backtracking on that initial plan. While minimal regulation has allowed relatively unfettered free speech and private profit, it has also led to the publishing of material on social media that is detrimental to national security, with the types of censorship that private companies have utilized also creating issues that are negatively influencing their society.

Overall, the introduction of social media into society has pushed authorities to make tactical shifts in their approaches to speech and expression. But the new media landscape still remains quite fluid, and it remains to be seen how authorities will attempt to control this environment in the future.

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