

Chinese Censorship of Online Discourse

Introduction

In this chapter we explore how practices of security governmentality are enacted in everyday censorship of online discourse in China. We do this by showing how internet censorship can be approached as a form of controlling the flow of ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘dangerous’ words and images. Together with propaganda, censorship, even on the level of words, is part of how political discourse is controlled in China. We illustrate this with two case studies that display what we call overt and covert meta-level censorship on China’s largest microblog service Sina Weibo and her largest search engine Baidu.com respectively.

Our analysis shows how meta-level search engine filtering is based on a two-layered system, where short-lived political incidents tend to be filtered for brief periods of time, while words that are conducive to building oppositional awareness tend to be censored more continuously. Controlling discourse in this way affects identity formation and power positions (Fairclough 1992) in Chinese society. Furthermore, censorship is used to sanitize images in the Chinese internet in order to create a neutral or pro-regime online environment for Chinese internet users, in our case, where it concerns the issue of democratic criticism. We begin the chapter by first introducing our framework and the main tenets of research on Chinese internet control. We then present our two case studies on internet control over social media and search engines on Sina Weibo and Baidu.

Analyzing Censorship

Censorship can be defined as ‘an authoritarian intervention by a third party into an act of communication between the sender of a message (the author) and its receiver (the reader), a message intended for the public but prevented from ever reaching it’ (Müller 2004: 11).

According to this way to understand censorship, it is essentially about outside actors’ intervention in free communication, and censorship’s nature is therefore always ‘external, coercive, and repressive’ (Bunn 2015: 30). From this viewpoint, censorship is a means of conscribing the contents of discourses.

However, a mere definition of censorship is too blunt a tool to analyze how online discourses are governed in China or in any other society for that matter. In order to make the definition of censorship more useful for the analysis at hand, we combine this definition with Foucault’s ideas about freedom and security as techniques of government and governmentality (Foucault 1979/1975, 2007/2004; Hindess 1996). Here, techniques refer to particular methods of engaging in activities that involve practical skills developed through training and practice, to modes of procedures in activities, and the disposition of things according to a regular plan or design (Huysmans 2006: 9). The use of such techniques modulates and enacts limits of freedom (Huysmans 2014), including both the content and formation of discourses. By studying these kinds of techniques and practices it is possible to examine the rationalities involved in them, and thereby gain access to broader visions of politics involved in security practices such as censorship.

In this chapter, we analyze Chinese search engine filtering through the notion of ‘flow-control’, which is taken to be a technique of security of the kind we defined above. From this point of view, internet censors follow the rationale of controlling the circulation of what we term ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ flows of information, terminology, and imagery. We have

drawn this distinction between types of circulation from the governmentality literature (Foucault 2007/2004: 18-19), but which kinds of contents are considered to be ‘good’, ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’ is not derived from theory, but from empirical observations.

Overall, circulation in its many forms is vital for successful societies. At the same time, a sovereign has to police its territory, even online territory, in terms of obedience and spatial layouts (Foucault 2007/2004: 14). An efficient sovereign constructs its territory so as to organize circulation in a way that allows good circulation, diminishes bad circulation, and eliminates dangerous circulation; while promoting the flow of positive things, like goods, risky and inconvenient things should be limited, like theft and disease (Foucault 2007: 18-19). In the case of the internet, such circulations contain information, representations, commerce, and communication. In online China, this sovereign desire translates as regulations on illegal and allowed internet use as well as the manipulation of internet technology, infrastructure, and contents in order to guide users to ‘safe usage’.

To better understand how public discourses are managed online in China, a further distinction needs to be made regarding different types of censorship. This distinction is the differences between *formal* and *structural censorship* (Bunn 2015), or *discrete* and *pervasive censorship* (Yoshino 2000). Formal/discrete censorship works by telling people what *not* to say or think, while structural/pervasive forms tell them what *to* say or think instead. Furthermore, as Yoshino (2000) notes, censorship is operated through illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, which we use as a further distinction for the analysis at hand. Illocutionary acts are acts done *in* saying something. In this regard, saying ‘I will punish you if you say this word’ is an illocutionary censorious act. Such acts conscribe the rights and duties of the censor and the censored in evoking conventions of censorship. In contrast, perlocutionary acts are done *by* saying something, for example by presenting historical events in a certain systematic manner

in public speech. This does not necessarily follow conventions, but produces the effect of censorship ‘naturally’.

Both types of censorship affect discourses and are a means of controlling them politically. Removing content can alter a discourse and hinder their inter-textual connections and connotations as even individual words as signs can represent larger ideas or discussions (Fairclough 1992; Milliken 1999). For censors, more desirable though is control of the formation of discourses as such. This can prevent unaware people from encountering ideas or viewpoints that are considered to be problematic by the authorities. It is possible to look for these kinds of omissions by looking for the ‘unsaid’ in addition to the ‘said’ (Dijk 1991).

In political analysis, a key question is who controls these types of censorship. Who has the power in society to deny topics from public online discourse and offer other ones in their stead? In liberal settings, governments have only limited powers for both formal and structural censorship, although there is variation in this depending on the topic and political context. In an authoritarian setting though, the government, or the party-state as is the case for China, has wider powers for both types of censorship almost by definition. In fact, China has one of the most powerful and sophisticated bureaucratic systems dedicated to this function (Esarey 2006; Shambaugh 2007), which perform perlocutionary forms of censorship under the rubric of propaganda work. Indeed, in censorship studies, propaganda is sometimes called ‘positive censorship’ (Baets 2011: 56). However, due to the limits of space, this chapter focuses on formal censorship and does not discuss Chinese online and offline propaganda systematically, even though both of our cases point to how the two forms of censorship go hand-in-hand in controlling public discourse.

The Chinese Internet Censorship System

The Chinese internet has the largest national user base in the world. In 2016 there were an estimated 721,434,547 Chinese people online (<http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/china/>). This is largely a result of government policy. Since the mid-1990s the internet has been regarded as one of the key areas of economic modernization, which is the primary political goal of the Chinese party-state. Therefore, in China, the state adopted the policy of actively promoting the building of national computer network infrastructure and providing inexpensive access for large segments of the population fairly early on (Harwit and Clark 2001: 384-391; Zhou 2007: 135-139). However, as soon as the party-state started to promote internet technology in China, it also began to find ways to control it in attempts to balance the development of information and communication technologies with the increased freedom of communication they have brought about, so that the latter would not threaten the one-party system (Paltemaa and Vuori 2009; MacKinnon 2011).

Research outside China was quick to realize the importance of internet censorship and it became a subject of many studies by the early 2000s. Early on, Cherian George (2004: 524) termed Chinese internet control practices as ‘promiscuous’, meaning that already then the authorities deployed computerized means and technologies of surveillance on internet users and contents in addition to the continued use of the old and time-proven methods of police surveillance and repression. Michael Chase and James C. Mulvenon (2002: 49-50) termed these as ‘high-tech’ and ‘low-tech’ means of internet censorship. Already by the mid-2000s these control technologies were assessed as the most extensive and sophisticated of their kind in the world (OpenNet Initiative 2005: 1-2).

Such observations still hold today, and more recent research further corroborates the earlier findings by laying out the increased sophistication and dynamic development of censorship

capabilities (see e.g. Feng 2017). For example, Knockel et al. (2015) call current Chinese internet censorship a ‘complex ecosystem’, with both technical and regulatory information controls in place on multiple levels. As they point out, much of the actual censorship work is conducted by private actors, such as internet platform developers and companies, which are highly regulated and face financial as well as legal sanctions if they trespass the limits. In the Chinese system, the actualization of censorship is delegated to the lowest level, and the service provider bears legal responsibility for all contents that are deemed illegal. Such a diagram of power produces self-censorship and deterrence effects for media actors beyond online service providers too (Sæther 2008). Yet, the source of this regulation is the party-state, and private companies should be seen as merely acting as its agents in enacting censorship regulations.

The actual content of Chinese internet censorship has also attracted a lot of attention over the years. As noted in research, censorship targets IP-addresses, keywords, or whole messages and texts that contain them, as well as other contents, such as images, accounts of certain authors, and search engine results. Clayton et al. (2007) note that the Great Firewall of China, a complex filtering system which controls data flows from and to China, filters ‘politically sensitive’ contents through lists of blocked IP-addresses. Bamman et al. (2012) have found that almost 16.25 percent of messages are deleted over time in the Sina Weibo microblog service in China, and that messages containing what were termed ‘politically sensitive’ words were deleted much more frequently than other messages. King et al. (2013, 2014) have found that blogs which contain information with ‘collective action potential’ are the main target of online censorship activities. This finding has in turn been challenged by Knockel et al. (2015) who have analyzed Chinese social video platform (SVP) messages with the conclusion that the 17,547 unique keywords that were used to trigger censorship in them focused on a wide variety of topics that included gambling, narcotics, pornography, the Communist Party,

religious movements, ethnic minorities, terrorism, party officials, and dissidents. Similarly, Ruan et al. (2016) analyzed censored keywords at WeChat and found that a list of blacklisted keywords there included, for example, words related to Falungong and June 4 (i.e. the Tiananmen incident of 1989). Our findings below corroborate many of these observations. However, as we argue, listing only the different types of contents subjected to censorship is not enough to understand how Chinese online censorship works. For that, we need a more nuanced understanding of the different types of information that is subjected to censorship, and how flow-control works in practice.

A Framework for Studying Internet Censorship

The starting point for our empirical analysis is that the nature of online information and censorship's ability to hide itself should be taken into account when analyzing formal internet censorship. The internet not only allows for cheap and almost instant access to a wide range of content, be that text, images, videos, or sound, and crucially for our point here, also to information about information. This includes information about demographics of public opinion, such as who and how many people are participating in public debate, how many people agree or disagree with given topics, what is trending and what is not, and so on. In principle, the internet therefore gives virtually costless (if not always unbiased) access to other people's preferences and social distribution of opinions in a way which has been practically impossible offline. It also allows almost instant access into several registers of information. A direct result of this is an improved ability to form like-minded communities in a way that can prove destabilizing in an authoritarian setting due to oppositional social mobilization (Kuran 1991, Egorov et al. 2009).

Therefore, from an authoritarian perspective, controlling the registers of information is as important as controlling the contents of messages that circulate online. It is of course not a

new notion that official decisions on secrecy and selections made by archivists on which archives are publicly available are forms of censorship (Baets 2011: 59), but arguably the importance of this phenomenon has become much more pronounced in the digital era, and we need to be aware of it when we study internet censorship.

Another important aspect in the analysis is the ability of censorship to hide itself. As Baets argues (2011: 54): '[t]he less visible the censorship, the more effective it is.' Indeed, in its ideal form, censorship is totally invisible, and is able to make thoughts unthinkable, not just incommunicable. Here, censorship aims to affect the formation of discourses, not just their contents. For this to happen, the user must not be aware that the contents, or registers they use, are being censored. This can be termed *covert* censorship. We suggest here a typology which helps us conceptualize and analyze these two key dimensions of internet censorship. In the typology, the first dimension is based on whether the user is made aware or kept unaware that the contents they use are being censored (*overt / covert*), while the second dimension is the type of information which is being censored (*content / meta-level information*). Of course, some users will be aware of even covert forms of censorship, so the term refers here to techniques that are intended to be covert irrespective of their success in achieving it.

In the typology, content level censorship refers to the formal type of censorship where content is either edited by a third party (censor) or the author (self-censorship). In principle, also the user may censor their own sources by selective reading, but this type is left out of the model here. Content-level censorship includes erasing single words or sentences and whole texts, as well as blocking access to webpages, blogs, entire websites, user accounts, and so on. If the user is informed about the alterations to the contents, the censorship act is overt, if not, it is covert.

Table 26.1 Typology of formal censorship from the user's point-of-view

	Content level	Meta level
Overt (user is made aware of the censorship taking place)	Example: Deleting parts of text, blocking access to a website/page and informing user of it, '*****'.	Search engine keyword censorship with for example notices on not showing 'illegal search terms'.
Covert (user is kept unaware of the censorship)	Self-censorship, deleting content from chats without informing the user (and omission being otherwise undetectable).	Search engine image censorship that shows 'good' results only, social media information bubbles.

Meta-level censorship refers to for example situations where online registers of information, such as search engine results, do not show findings that contain sensitive content or keywords. Overt meta-level censorship happens when users are told that access to information registers is restricted, but not that the information does not exist as such. This has been a common phenomenon in online China (see Figure 1), and is studied in the first case in this chapter. In contrast, covert meta-level censorship refers to instances where the search engine user is not informed that there are registers which the user cannot access. Instead, the user is directed to other registers, which contain only 'good' contents. We illustrate this with our second case below.

The distinction between the two types may sound small, but it is still important. While denying access to an index does disrupt communication, it does not prevent people from

being curious about what they are missing if they are told about censorship, and after becoming aware of it seeking ways to circumvent censorship. With covert meta-level censorship, where users are directed to ‘good’ contents without telling them about omissions, search engine users who are oblivious to the possible sensitive connotations of their search terms remain so, and will not act further. Meta-level covert censorship is a type of censorship which tries to keep the ignorant ignorant.

In terms of controlling public discourse, overt forms of censorship nudge people who are already potentially aware of discourses that are considered harmful by authorities. Hindering the flow of ideas in society in this manner can be considered as crude. Covert forms of censorship are more efficient and intricate, as they affect the formation of discourses as such. From the Party’s viewpoint, it is better to nip unwanted identities in the bud in this way. Indeed, at the moment, there are some indications that Chinese online censorship is moving towards a more covert mode of operation. For example, Ruan et al. (2016, 2017) point out how users are no longer presented with a warning message when they enter sensitive keywords at WeChat, which indicates that in at least some social media platforms overt editorial censorship is becoming more covert. Our second case here discusses this phenomenon in regards to image searches. First however, we will examine how overt meta-level censorship works on Sina Weibo.

Case 1: Meta-Level Overt Censorship on Sina Weibo

We now turn to our first case, which is about overt meta-level censorship and present the data and findings of our statistical analysis of Sina Weibo microblog search filtering (see Vuori and Paltemaa 2015 for a fuller account). The source material used in the study consisted of two lists of filtered keywords on Sina Weibo. The first list is the Chinese version of China

Digital Times' (CDT) List of Sensitive Words on Sina Weibo, as collected April 16, 2011 – July 27, 2013 (<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/grass-mud-horse-list/>). During this time, the list contained 1,858 unique words/phrases that were filtered at the Sina Weibo search engine for at least some period of time. The CDT list is produced through crowdsourcing. The second list we used was Jason Ng's Blocked on Weibo –list. Both of these lists represent counter surveillance of censorship in China. We combined them into what we call the Combined Filtered Word List (CFWL), with 2,387 unique words or phrases verified as having been filtered on Sina Weibo at the time of the study.

We then checked each keyword on the CFWL several times over longer periods of time in Sina Weibo search engine, which allowed us to do both synchronic and diachronic analysis of the blocked words, and changes therein. Our methodology consisted of first creating a matrix of associative socio-political attributes of the filtered words. The basic question for this classification concerned the politically significant feature/s of each word/phrase that would warrant it to become blocked in the political context of the moment it was reported as blocked. This involved relating the blocked words to the Chinese political system, and to current events in Chinese politics and society, i.e. to sensitive discourses. This provided for the synchronic division of the censored words into categories where one keyword could be associated with multiple attributes at the same time. This allowed for multi-dimensional analysis for possible logics that could be discerned from what was censored and for how long.

We also conducted diachronic statistical testing of the differences between groups of words subjected to short- and long-term censorship. The sizes of both groups allowed us to perform statistical testing to find out whether the differences in word-associations and the duration of blocking were statistically significant or not. This was made in order to find out whether the

censorship of words was random in regard to our categorization and the times they were censored, or whether statistically significant patterns would appear. As statistically significant patterns did emerge, it was possible to probe the overall logic of search engine filtering in China by finding the differences between ‘dangerous’ and ‘bad’ circulations of words.

Overall Impressions of Word Filtering

Our statistical analysis of the CFWL revealed one basic feature of search filtering on Sina Weibo, namely, that it has a notably strong emphasis on names. 64.4 percent of key words were associated with this attribute. The second largest association was with Phrases at 48.8 percent. Other frequent associations were with the CCP (41.6 percent), Persons (40.2 percent), Incidents (34.7 percent), and Leaders (31.4 percent). Words associated with the Party numbered almost 3.5 times more than words related to Opposition (12 percent), or Mass Protests (10.5 percent). Only 2.8 percent of words were associated with directly Subversive content, such as calling explicitly for the overthrow of the one-party system or names of persons or organizations known to have such aims.

The general attributes of censored words therefore suggest that controlling the circulation of directly anti-party words and words related to protests is not the main task of overt meta-level censorship, even though it plays a role too. Instead, our analysis suggests that Sina Weibo meta-level censorship is geared more toward controlling public discourse on the Party itself. This conclusion is strengthened, and gains more nuance when we sort the CFWL words into selected major categories and analyze their other associations from three subsamples, those of Names, Phrases, and the CCP. Arguably, such cross-tabulation is much more fruitful than only analyzing the general one-dimensional distribution of filtered words, which in principle could just reflect the frequencies of words in everyday language.

Names

The largest category of filtered proper names was that of Person, which referred predominantly to proper names of individuals (59.3 percent). Notably, 52.7 percent of these Names (also as Euphemisms) censored on Sina Weibo were associated with the CCP. This means that about 1/3 of all words censored on Sina Weibo in total were related to CCP members' names. Since only about six percent of the Chinese are CCP members, the frequency of their names in natural speech cannot explain their share on the list. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the fourth largest category in this subsample, namely Leader/s, refers predominantly to the highest echelons of the CCP. It is difficult to think of any business-related reason why Sina Weibo would voluntarily filter names of leading cadres from its microblog searches. Indeed, having them circulating freely would probably increase user traffic at Sina Weibo and thus company revenues, since many people want to talk about politics. But this most likely is the problem. The logical conclusion is that the choice of these names reflects security rather than commercial logic, although using names instead of some other keywords as the main word-type for filtering is also likely to be the least disruptive method for data flows as a whole.

Concerning other names on the list, Chinese security experts also filter searches for leading oppositional figures (Activists/Dissidents). This is done almost solely by using their real proper names, and only a few blacklisted euphemisms concern oppositional issues in general – such as calling the Charter 08 ‘08 县长’ instead of ‘08 宪章’. It is relatively easy to understand the logic for why censors block the names of leading oppositional figures: the Party cannot allow the formation of peer-competitors. Yet, this censorship conduct also reveals one of the basic reasons for meta-level censorship practices in online China: making it

more difficult for netizens to communicate freely about the leading personalities by their names hinders their ability to form shared critical opinions on them and their policies.

Obviously, the creation of coordination problems through search filtering is not a fool proof form of suppression: in Chinese language homophones and euphemisms are too numerous and versatile to prevent all online communication on leading figures in the Party. Indeed, search filtering lets certain words through. Yet, the most successful euphemisms tend to become victims of their success, which, as elsewhere (Leistert 2012), displays how Chinese surveillance and resistance to it have an adaptive relationship, just as with protest in general (Paltemaa & Vuori 2006; Vuori 2015). Despite its limits though, meta-level search filtering still fractures public discourse and thereby makes political mobilization more difficult. Such hindrance practice covers a much larger volume of censorship than does the suppression of explicit resistance or opposition. It is more effective to curb the formation of discourses than to police their contents.

Phrases

The second most frequent category of censored words was Phrases. We categorized any noun or sentence, which was not a proper name, as a Phrase. Blocked phrases are often combined with names, meaning entries that contain both names and phrases, such as ‘bring down the CCP’ (打倒共产党). Associations to Incidents, Mass Protest, and Disharmony/Unrest are, relatively speaking, more common in this category than in the general distribution. This indicates that when censors are not censoring names, they are often interested in phrases that refer to social instability.

‘Obscene/sexual content’ is another notable category under Phrases (17 percent). Although no amount of vulgarisms on Sina Weibo will bring the one-party system down as such, the concern with vulgarisms indicates how Chinese censors also have a paternalistic role to keep public discourse civil, as also laid down in the *White Paper on the Internet in China* (Information Office 2012). Almost everything else in the censored word list has a ‘political’ meaning in the sense that they can be directly associated with some aspects of the Chinese political system.

Among the mid-range categories (5–15 percent) of censored phrases were words/sentences associated with Leadership Succession (10.5 percent) and intra-party Factionalism (8.4 percent). Their relative high number was likely due to the proximity of the 18th Party Congress, and then the first assembly of the 18th National People’s Congress in the period under study 2012-2013. This indicates how free communication on the most important political event in the political life of China was deemed as ‘bad’ circulation.

It is also notable how censored phrases associated with the Opposition, the Political System, or commenting on it in general (such as calling it a ‘tyranny’) were notably fewer in number than phrases associated with the CCP, or Incidents and Mass Protests. Furthermore, and quite interestingly, words with direct anti-one-party content, i.e. those associated with Activism/Dissent, Subversion, or Political System Change were all at the low end of shares (< 5 percent). This indicates that censors are, relatively speaking, less concerned about words in these categories than may be commonly assumed. The results of King et al. (2013) point to the same conclusion. However, this result held only in synchronic analysis, and diachronic analysis revealed quite a different kind of pattern of words that were censored in the long-term.

CCP

To begin with, and not surprisingly in light of earlier findings, a large part of search filtering about the Party was about Party leaders and their names (70.8 percent). Most of these names were not connected to Phrases, but were blocked as such. This indicates how the security experts regarded public discourse where the names of Party leaders appeared as ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’ circulation *per se*, which they needed to curb regardless of its nature.

Also references to the Party as an organization were among the censored terms. On the level of single words, even the CCP (共产党, *Gòngchǎndǎng*) and its common abbreviations (such as 中共, *Zhōng-Gòng*) and many, often derogatory, euphemisms that referred to the Party (such as 共贪党, *Gòngtāndǎng*, the ‘Party of Common Corruption’) were censored. Censors thereby seemed to deem that the logic of no talk was better than any negative talk when it came to the Party and its leaders, even if not all comments about the Party are negative in Sina Weibo. Some of such content might actually be supportive, even without the contributions of the paid-for, pro-party commentators – the so-called Fifty Cent Party (Han 2015), who are on their part responsible for perlocutionary online censorship. Yet, clearly, censors regarded such collateral damage through censoring supportive comments along with negative ones as less significant than the possible damage the free circulation of comments on the Party and its leaders might have. Such names quite likely feature in negative discourse, which means they are among the most efficient words for hindering negative discourse formation and intertextual connections.

Compared to the general distribution of filtered words, censors were also more concerned about Incidents that involved the CCP in one form or another (40.9 percent). Usually, this meant filtering the names of party members who were involved in Scandals (20.8 percent), targeted by various Rumors (18.4 percent), or were under Criminal investigation for

Corruption or other Misbehaviors in office (12.4 percent). Censors were also keen to suppress the free circulation of references to Party Factionalism (25.9 percent). Closely related to this, the censors filtered communication on the then ongoing Party Leadership Succession (27.9 percent). Only relatively few censored words were associated with the offices or organizations within the CCP structure itself (5.2 percent).

Bad and Dangerous Circulation

Analyzing the general associations of filtered words on Sina Weibo alone cannot reveal which of these words were regarded more ‘dangerous’ than others by the censorship authorities. In order to get a bearing on this aspect of filtering, we analyzed how long words associated with the different categories remained filtered. The combination of diachronic and synchronic examination allowed us to tell ‘dangerous’ and ‘bad’ circulation apart. For the present case, we based the operational distinction of ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ flows of information on the length of censorship. Arguably, the length of time a word remains filtered tells us how constant security experts deem the threat of the discourses associated with the word to be. Therefore, the longer a word remains filtered, the more lasting danger it constitutes for the political system from the security expert’s viewpoint.

For our diachronic analysis, we divided the words in the CFWL into Group 1 for words blocked for less than one year after they first appeared on the list ($n = 905$), and Group 2 for words being blocked at least a year after they first appeared on the list ($n = 398$). For this, we tested all words twice, once within the year (normally within 6-8 months after its listing) and once after a year had passed from when the word was first listed.

The sizes of both groups, and categories therein, allowed us to perform the Fisher’s exact test (two-sided) on the differences of the shares of blocked words between the two sub-samples

by each category of association, and find out whether the differences were statistically significant or not. In performing the two-sided Fisher's exact test, we did not have any pre-set hypothesis on the possible direction of differences between the groups, i.e. we had no expectation on which types of words would be censored for shorter or longer periods, or that there would be significantly strong associations between the word categories and their duration of censorship. Yet, as the results showed, the duration of censorship that words with certain associations were subjected to was not random, but displayed a clear and theoretically interesting pattern instead. In general, this finding supports the argument that Sina Weibo search filtering follows the logic of controlling the circulation of 'bad' and 'dangerous' communication flows. The result also shows how censors regard many words in the smaller categories of the general distribution table significant enough to warrant long-term filtering.

Categories that were, statistically speaking, significantly more likely to receive only shorter-term filtering reveal an interesting pattern concerning what is regarded as 'bad' circulation. These categories were Incidents, Scandals, Corruption, Crime/Misbehaviour, Place Names, Disharmony/Unrest, and Company. Censors seem to rely on the fact that words associated with these categories tend to be salient in public opinion only for relatively short periods of time, after which they are usually dealt with, forgotten, buried with other topics in the media, or even become allowed topics. Furthermore, most protest incidents in China are local and / or limited in their scope, which explains the fact that Place names fall under this category.

Regarding the attributes which were statistically more strongly associated with the group of words censored for at least one year, two clear censorship criteria seem to apply. These words either dealt with the 'hard core' of the political system and its functioning, or opposition to it. Thus, we find that security experts found words referring to the Politburo Standing Committee, Party Leadership Factionalism, and Party Succession as 'dangerous' circulation

in public discourse. As was already discussed in the descriptive analysis above, Sina Weibo search filtering pays great attention to words related to the names of the highest Party leaders. This result indicates that the closer one gets to the core of the leadership, the more continuous or frequent this censorship also becomes.

The second ‘dangerous’ type of words was those associated with opposition to one-party rule. The categories of Opposition, Tiananmen Incident 1989, Oppression, Democracy, Subversive/Anti-Party, Political System and Political System Change, Falungong, and Separatism all present aspects of such opposition, and were all regarded as dangerous circulation and thus received longer-term censorship. In addition, the categories of Web Address and Independent Media consisted mostly of names of opposition-related webpages and newspapers as well as Western media, which often contain critical views and sensitive news on Chinese political leaders and the Party. Arguably then, the effort made to censor words associated with these categories can be regarded as a sign of security experts protecting the hard core of the political system, i.e. one-party rule, by trying to prevent all kinds of public discourses on the party leaders, opposition, and oppositional ideas, not just those that oppose the Party.

Case 2: Meta-Level Covert Censorship on Baidu

The second case in this chapter deals with covert meta-level censorship, i.e. offering internet users censored online registers of information without informing the users about censorship. Below, we demonstrate this kind of censorship practice by comparing image search results between the largest Chinese search engine Baidu.com and Google.com. For this we use the geographical search term “*Tiananmen / 天安门*” in English and in Chinese simplified characters as keywords in both search engines. The Tiananmen incident is arguably a *sui*

generis case of highly sensitive historical events for the Party, and studies on Chinese online censorship practice have invariably found that references to it tend to be censored (see above). The difference between the two search engines is visible in the screenshots in figures 2 and 3.

As can be seen in the screenshots, Google search results are dominated by imagery of the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident, whereas Baidu.com offers a display of national symbols omitting all pictures from 1989.

After retrieving and archiving 100 of the first images for each keyword in both search engines, in both languages, a three person expert panel classified manually the images based on their content into politically sensitive, neutral, and pro-regime. A statistical breakdown of these results can be seen in the table X.3.

Table 26.2 The types of images in Baidu.com and Google.com for “Tiananmen / 天安门”, % (n = 400)

	Sensitive	Neutral	Pro-regime
<i>Tiananmen</i>			
Baidu Chinese	0	2	98
Baidu English	0	0	100
Google Chinese	6	8	86
Google English	61	8	31

The results show how Baidu directed its users to images which were only neutral or pro-regime in their nature. This means that scenic pictures and/or pictures that included symbols of the party-state were all Baidu users got from their search. In comparison, Google results were more diverse and included many sensitive images. In fact, 61 percent of Google images were sensitive, mostly about the 1989 demonstrations and crackdown, while the corresponding figure at Baidu was zero percent.

It is also notable that Baidu searches were not language sensitive. As shown in table 4, the difference between results of using Chinese and English keywords at Baidu was very small. With Google, the difference was much more pronounced, but at the same time it shows how Chinese internet censorship creates a spill-over effect of covert meta-level censorship when Google search offers its Chinese language users less sensitive and more pro-regime content than its English language users. The reason for this is that Google directs its Chinese language searches largely to mainland Chinese IP-addresses. In our sample, the percent was 69 compared to the 0 percent when using English. Baidu allowed only a very few results from outside mainland China into its registers even when not using characters. In our sample, 97 percent of Baidu results were retrieved from Chinese mainland domains when using Chinese characters, and 91 percent when using English. It can be assumed that when Google searches its images from mainland Chinese servers, it offers contents that have mostly already been censored and therefore Google indirectly subjects its Chinese language users to mainland censorship. This case also shows how illocution turns into perlocution when internet users are guided to neutral-to-pro-regime imagery without notice. Combining the different types of censorship enables the censors to control public discourse more efficiently in this way. Censorship authorities are not blind to visual forms of discourse, but include them in their control activities.

Conclusion

As we argued in the beginning of this chapter, through studying the techniques of government and governmentality, as they appear in censorship practices, it is possible to examine the rationalities involved in them, and thereby gain access to broader visions of the political entailed in security practices. Chinese internet security practices include covert and overt editorial and meta-level censorship which are aimed at controlling public discourses in

a way which goes beyond censoring information about collective action and protest to making social mobilization difficult in general through censoring information about the Party itself, its past, and challenges to its rule. In its ideal form, this censorship is totally invisible, controls the formation of discourses, and is thereby able to make oppositional thoughts unthinkable, not just incommunicable.

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Note on Contributors

Juha A. Vuori is (acting) Professor of International Politics at the University of Turku. He is the author of *Critical Security and Chinese Politics* published in 2014 by Routledge. His articles have appeared in journals such as the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Security Dialogue*, *Surveillance & Society*, and the *Asian Journal of Political Science*. His research interests include critical studies of security, speech act theory, semiotics, and nuclear weapons in addition to Chinese politics and internet-control.

Lauri Paltemaa is Professor of East Asian Contemporary History and Politics at the University of Turku. He is the author of *Managing Famine, Flood and Earthquake in China - Tianjin 1958-85* published in 2016 by Routledge. His articles have appeared in journals such as *The China Journal*, *China Information* and *The Modern Asian Studies*. His research interests include Chinese contemporary history, disaster management, and social movements in addition to Chinese politics and internet-control.