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Censorship Deletion in The Chinese Social Media

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In this analysis, Associate Professor Jun Liu and Jingyi Zhao critically review censorship studies and present one of the first studies on censorship of both plain text and multimedia content on the Chinese social media.

Although the Internet allows people to circulate messages using different media, most censorship studies discuss the removal of text content. This article presents a systematic study regarding the censorship of both plain text and multimedia content on the Chinese Internet. By analyzing both censored and surviving posts on the Chinese social media platform Weibo during the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, they find that multimedia posts suffered more intensive censorship deletion than plain text posts, with censorship programs being oriented more toward multimedia content like images than the text content of multimedia posts. This analysis has significant implications for censorship studies, information control, and politics in the “post-text” era.

Key takeaways:

- Censorship targets both text and multimedia content online, but most studies examine the removal or the manipulation of text.
- Multimedia content has been an understudied dimension of online censorship in China thus far.
- This analysis has found that texts with politically sensitive information are more likely to survive after censorship than are images.
- Posting images, often considered as an alternative way of circumventing censorship, may not be as efficient as described, as imagery elements draw extra attention from censorship deletion and subsequently suffer high rates of removal.

Keywords: Censorship, deletion, social media, text, multimedia, image, China, Weibo
More Than Plain Text:
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Despite the vision of the Internet as a free, independent space, online censorship is flourishing and becoming more complex thanks to technological advancements. Two thirds of Internet users live with some type of online censorship (AFP & Beall, 2016). Among studies investigating Internet censorship in different contexts, China’s fine-toothed Internet censorship has been called “the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world” (OpenNet Initiative, 2005, p. 4). The censorship system employs vast networks of thousands of people and automated filtering software to track down problematic content and alleged miscreants among the country’s 800 million Internet users.

This study joins similar efforts to advance understanding of a significant and understudied dimension of online censorship in China: multimedia content. Multimedia – including graphics, sound, and video – represent one of the “defining qualities” (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996, p. 4) of communication on the Internet. However, although studies of Internet censorship acknowledge that censorship targets both text and multimedia content online, most examine the removal or the manipulation of text. For this reason, patterns of non-text removal remain understudied by censorship scholars. In this investigation, we present an empirical study about censorship that removes not only plain text, but also multimedia elements such as images. This study is one of the first to explore the censorship of politically sensitive events outside the Chinese mainland in Hong Kong. Our discussion offers theoretical insights and pragmatic implications for understanding online censorship and politics.

Tracking Internet Censorship in China

Censorship on the Chinese Internet has drawn extensive attention from academia and wider society. Generally speaking, scholarship addresses this issue from either a top-down or a bottom-up approach. The former refers to investigating regime policy and the policing of Internet censorship, such as regulatory control, as well as the technical infrastructure of the “Great Firewall of China” (Barme & Ye, 1997), such as techniques of filtering, domain name system (DNS) poisoning, and virtual private network blocking.

The lack of understanding of the sophistication of censoring regarding multimedia has led to two limitations of the current literature. First, without denying their substantial contributions, existing studies present an incomplete picture of
censorship mechanisms. Although we know how censors detect and remove “sensitive” textual information, we know less about how they remove posts containing meanings conveyed in non-textual forms. In some cases, text-based interaction remains “largely unaffected,” while messages with photo and video suffer “disruptions” (Dou, 2017). Three out of four deleted social media posts involve pictures (Zhu et al., 2013, p. 230), but the reason for this deletion phenomenon remains unclear.

Second, a dominant focus on text (removal) risks misrepresenting the (Chinese) Internet as a text-dominated sphere. In online practices, people frequently engage with a variety of modes of communication that include static or moving images, spoken language, emoticons, videos, and uniform resource locators (URLs). Content analyses of the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook have highlighted the increased frequency of the use of images and videos over text-based content. The New York Times has described “the post-text” era as “an online culture in which text recedes to the background, and sounds and images become the universal language” (Manjoo, 2018). Chinese Internet users, similar to their western counterparts, have developed diverse multimedia online activities. The multi-function messaging app WeChat, a central cog of everyday life in China, boasted over 1 billion daily active users as of August 2018, with 410 million audio and video calls being made per day (Zhang, 2019). Over half of the posts on Weibo, China’s biggest and most commonly used microblog service, include multimedia content (Zhao et al., 2013). A report by Sina Data Center (2018) has acknowledged that among original posts on Weibo, 49.1% have images and 36.5% include video. A bias toward textual communication hence passes over how censors adapt their practices in response to the richness of the online practices of Chinese Internet users and the sophistication of corresponding censorship. For instance, we do not know if posting photos or videos that contain sensitive content represents an effective way of evading censorship. A comprehensive understanding of censorship, as our bottom-up approach suggests, involves a close examination of information removal beyond the current text-dominated focus.

Case selection

We have chosen the case of the Umbrella Movement (hereafter “UM”) in Hong Kong in 2014, also known as “the Occupy Central movement,” to study censorship deletion on Weibo. The UM was a political action composed of street occupations and blockades, which lasted from September until December 2014. It started with protests against a conservative decision by Beijing regarding proposed reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system (Deutsche Welle, 2014; Ortmann, 2015). The movement got its name after the protesters defended themselves with umbrellas as part of passive resistance to the Hong Kong police’s use of teargas. Officials in both Hong Kong and Beijing denounced the movement as “illegal” and a
“violation of the rule of law” (People’s Daily’s commentary writer, 2014).

Even though the confrontation occurred outside the Chinese mainland, it attracted general attention among Internet users here. Such popularity caused terms like “Hong Kong” and “Occupy Central” to become trending topics on Weibo (Kuo, 2014). The China Society Yearbook (Shehui Lan Pishui), published by the official think tank Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to examine social issues and changes in the previous year, ranked UM second in its top 20 high-profile topics among Chinese Internet users (Sing Pao, 2015).

On September 28, 2014, Chinese government authorities issued a censorship directive that demanded the immediate deletion of “information about Hong Kong students violently assaulting the government and about ‘Occupy Central.’ ... Strictly manage interactive channels, and resolutely delete harmful information” (Rudolph, 2014). Censors rapidly removed Internet messages with words such as “Hong Kong,” “barricades,” “Occupy Central,” “class boycott,” and later “umbrella,” which, together with yellow ribbons, had become icons of Hong Kong’s protests. Censors acted swiftly in response to several strategies to circumvent the censorship, such as the English transliterations of the blocked Chinese phrases “xianggang” for Hong Kong and “zhanzhong” for “Occupy Central.” King et al. (2014, p. 1251722-2) have observed that “there is no censorship of posts about collective action events outside mainland China.” Nevertheless, the UM case was regarded as “deviant” (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, pp. 302-303), with a recorded degree of censorship in Weibo reported by the Weiboscope, a censorship monitoring project at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) (Boehler, 2014). The UM thus represents a relevant but understudied case by which to scrutinize censorship on Weibo.

**Discussion**

The Internet represents a space where multimedia communication can flourish (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996, p. 4). Although studies of censorship deletion on Chinese social media have recognized the phenomenon of multimedia content removal, little systematic research has been undertaken on the issue. Moreover, while these studies offer insightful analyses of notoriously opaque Internet censorship, their “textual-bias” (Soukup, 2000, p. 409) approach risks being reductive. In other words, by limiting the multimodal nature of rich and diverse online practices to plain text only, there is the risk of oversimplifying both communication practices and the agility of censorship deletion. Censorship has adjusted to the increasingly multimedia-rich online environment. Using both censored and surviving Weibo posts during the two-month period of the 2014 UM in Hong Kong, we have compared plain text and multimedia posts as well as their individual elements (text, images, and long Weibo). Our findings reveal a highly relevant yet little known dimension of censorship deletion that targets multimedia posts involving images and long Weibo. We have
further found a significant difference regarding deleted-or-survive between plain text and multimedia posts, whereby multimedia posts are more frequently deleted than plain text posts. Further, censorship in this study is oriented toward images that contain politically sensitive information. Our analysis has found that texts with politically sensitive information are more likely to survive after censorship than are images. There are several plausible explanations for the censorship deletion trends observed in this study. First, the exposure of multimedia posts may lead to their greater deletion in comparison with plain text. The attention-grabbing capacity of multimedia elements (Long, 2013; Zhao et al., 2013) makes it easy to draw social media users’ — including censors’ — attention. The popularity of multimedia also means an increased risk of danger, as censors may notice and remove them. Second, and related to the first point, the influence of multimedia can draw the specific attention of and hence lead to blackout from censors. Where they include visual or audio elements, multimedia posts have greater capacity for authenticity-presenting, emotionally arousing, and easy-to-elaborate information (Cai & Zhou, 2019, p. 17). These factors render multimedia posts more likely to go viral than plain text. Emotion has long been acknowledged as playing a crucial role in energizing and orienting collective action mobilization. Given this consideration, censors are likely to be concerned with preventing or mitigating the escalation of multimedia posts. Third, both images and their control emerged as a salient issue during the UM protests, leading to the more stringent censorship of visual content on social media (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018, p. 633). Whether it be the iconic image of umbrellas (from which the movement derived its name) or the blocking of the photo- and video-sharing social networking site Instagram in the Chinese mainland at this time (Vlastelica, 2014), images played an important role for the UM. This in turn made it necessary for censors to take sterner measures toward pictorial content than plain text online.

**Implications**

The empirical results of our study have critical implications for the literature on censorship and politics in China, as well as social media analytics. We will explain the results first by generalizing our findings concerning the censorship targeting of both plain text and multimedia posts, and then by extending the discussion to social media analytics in general. Theoretically speaking, the censorship deletion rate on the Chinese Internet should be higher than the majority of existing studies focusing on plain text have reported. As summarized earlier, current studies of online censorship in China have presented theories of textual-based content removal and fabrication strategies by the regime. Despite the significance of their revelations, these studies regrettably underestimate the deletion rate, because Chinese Internet users produce a substantial amount of multimedia posts, and in reality, censorship blacks out both plain text and multimedia content. Therefore, in
practice, the censorship deletion rate should take into consideration ignored censored multimedia posts. Future efforts should either clearly acknowledge their specific preference toward certain mode(s) in their theoretical assumptions or methodological designs or deliberately take real-world settings (i.e., multimedia-rich online practices) into account in order to gain a comprehensive picture of the complexity of censorship mechanisms.

We further propose a theory – or “a simplification of the complex realities on the ground” (King et al., 2017, p. 496) – that different modes of communication are related to censorship deletion strategies. As found in this study, censorship has a strong preference for multimedia posts over plain text on account of the former’s popularity and influence. Further, given the prevalence of posting images, especially those that are politically contentious, censorship deletion pays close attention to pictorial content. By doing so, censorship deletion technology strategically aims to eradicate the potentially viral process of visually affective content sharing and its subsequent emotion-driven mobilization (Goodwin et al., 2009). Our findings hence help extend and refine current theories of censorship by suggesting that an interrogation of censorship preferences for different modes and contents should drive scholarly inquiry.

Moreover, a preference for multimedia posts over plain text increases barriers to reading and comprehending information. Roberts (2018, pp. 5-6) has defined one category of censorship as “friction,” increasing the barriers to accessing information by raising costs related to time and money. Similarly, a censorship deletion preference for multimedia content, especially non-textual mode(s), leaves most (sensitive) content in a textual mode, thereby heightening the level of demand for engagement with the content (Marcus et al., 1996). That is to say, a comprehension of textual content generally requires more time, greater concentration, and specific literacy (Levie & Lentz, 1982; Newton, 2011, p. 94), while multimedia content such as images or videos allows people to easily skim-read and grasp the content. To take down multimedia posts but allow plain text posts to survive would distract people from politically sensitive (textual) content by raising costs related to content comprehension.

At the pragmatic level, our findings suggest that posting images, often considered as an alternative way of circumventing censorship, may not be as efficient as described (Mina, 2014), as imagery elements draw extra attention from censorship deletion and subsequently suffer high rates of removal.
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