Confronting Online Scrutiny: Doing Social Science Research in the Context of Internet Censorship in China

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The internet has been tightly censored in China to strengthen political control over the years. On the one hand, the suppression of public communication provides opportunities for researchers to study the mechanism of internet and state control in China. On the other hand, many social scientists themselves confront tightening online censorship during research activities. Internet scrutiny is complicating the situation of social science research nowadays. In this article, I will draw on my own research experience of internet censorship in China and discuss how researchers could better formulate research questions and collect online data in the context of internet scrutiny. Beyond that, I call for an active attitude in tackling the problem and discuss attempts and strategies to navigate sensitivity during research.

Introduction

When I started to design an online questionnaire on feminist attitudes among Chinese college students, I had never anticipated that it would confront internet censorship at the end of the data-gathering procedure and was blocked along with all the responses. I grumbled to my friend, who was doing social research as well. She told me: "Last year, I met the same situation when I was helping an NGO distributing online questionnaires on domestic violence." The internet has become a vital resource and implements for social science research to date. Many researchers in the field of psychology, sociology, and media studies have carried their research on the internet (Buchanan & Smith, 1999; Davis, 1999). Nevertheless, researchers who study on sensitive topics are facing hurdles imposed by the strict online scrutiny in authoritarian states. The objective of this article is to evoke and increase researchers' awareness of the potential impediments and risks in the Chinese context of internet censorship. In the first section, I will review how censorship influences researchers in identifying research questions and collecting data. The sensitive discourses on the internet and the subsequent development of social movement may have a distinct model in tightly censored countries from countries with an open internet environment. Also, the information security of social scientists is not guaranteed when conducting online research activities. This requires scholars to be careful about the issue in order to identify valid research questions and ensure their own safety. In the second section, I will reflect on my feminist research experience in China as an empirical case and discuss my attempts and strategies to manage sensitivity. The detailed process of how I manipulate the wording to avoid censorship and some technical tools I used during the survey are introduced.

The implication of online censorship on social science research

Identifying the research question in the context of internet scrutiny
The internet regulation mechanism provides abundant research opportunities to researchers who are specialized in studying authoritarian countries and the intersection of technology and society. Recent studies have examined how internet censorship discourages netizens from contributing contents online (Lindtner et al., 2008; Shklovski & Kotamraju, 2011), the ways in which censorship influences discussions on social media (Chen, Zhang, & Wilson, 2013), and its adverse effects on government's credibility (Richet, 2013). Other researchers incorporate it into a specific civil rights issue. For instance, Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa (2011) studied internet control in Uyghur and suggested that this practice reflected broader governmental concerns about the internet's capability in mobilizing protestors.

While there are many research questions in the context of online scrutiny, researchers need to pay attention to the feasibility of research questions in different socio-cultural and institutional settings. There are two aspects to consider contextualization of research question in different states. Firstly, the intentions of political apparatuses to scrutinize the online environment are different. For example, one important goal of censorship in Islamic societies is to purify people's beliefs about religion. According to Takeyh and Gvosdev (2004), systematic Islamic censorship implemented by the government of Egypt on the social median is paralleled with the imposition of religious education in state schools. In comparison, the China government has few interests in religious beliefs, but rather emphasizes social and political stability. Social media in China has been regarded as an essential instrument in constructing an image of a harmonious and consensual society (Tong, 2009). The different intentions of political regimes to censor online content affect the degrees of sensitivity of topics in different states. Thus, some research questions can be raised in a problematic way in one country if these questions are postulated in a liberal environment.

On the other hand, the technology methods and censorship levels are different across countries. Though the internet does not have explicit national boundaries, it can present a distinct online censorship environment due to different levels of state control. While Iran has launched its own version of YouTube, Wikipedia is available in Iran in its entirety (Clark et al., 2017). As for Turkey, it is building a domestic search engine and email service. And China further makes efforts to restrict online information and communication on its home-grown platform (Clark et al., 2017). Concerning the progressive degrees of online censorship, social scientists therefore should contextualize their research questions in a specific setting when studying sensitive topics in authoritarian states.

Data collection and sensitivity navigation
Doing social science research in China, as Sam Berlin (2019) stated, can be challenging, since official statistics can be unreliable, important information is kept out of the public eye, safety is hard to guarantee, and access is difficult to secure. Mette Hansen (2006) also figures out that short term fieldwork produces a remarkable amount of data, but this may be treated more as an example of official or semi-official discourse than a reflection of life in a given community. Similar to the data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, online communication and information could also be filtered.

Currently, internet tools have been employed by many social science researchers in data collection. In particular, crawling internet information and distributing online questionnaires are two important methods. Yet, under the online scrutiny, internet information could be cleared, an online questionnaire may be blocked, and the researcher risk divulging personal information. Authorities of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) of

China has worked with technology experts at Shenzhen University to develop an "e-mail filtration system" that is able to detect and delete "unwanted" e-mails (Walton, 2001). In addition, the MPS announced in 2000 that within three years it would have created a nationwide computerized database containing personal details and ID numbers for every adult in the country (Walton, 2001).

These require researchers to manage online behaviors and conduct self-censorship properly. Indeed, researchers themselves confront censorship and even more frequently. In a survey conducted by Greitens and Truex in 2018, scholars working in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong are selected to finish a questionnaire sent to their institutional email address about their experience of doing research in China (Greitens & Truex, 2018). According to the China Scholar Research Experience Survey (CSRES), roughly 9 percent of China scholars report that they have been "invited to tea" by officials within the past ten years, and 5 percent of researchers report difficulty in obtaining a visa. Calibrating risk, protecting interlocutors, and appropriately managing sensitive inquiries are particularly important for early-career researchers to navigate research in China (Greitens & Truex, 2018).

To mitigate the risk of being censored, researchers need to adopt strategies such as self-censorship to navigate the sensitivity. Self-censorship is the act of censoring one's own behavior or thoughts introspectively. People self-censor themselves for fear of potential controversies or punishments. For qualitative researchers working with living people, self-censorship in the fieldwork might be a way of saying "protecting the people around you" – a core ethical research practice (Greitens & Truex, 2018). Self-censorship could also be another way of saying "knowing when to keep your mouth shut (Greitens & Truex, 2018)." Greitens and Truex (2018) summarized the strategies adopted by the CSRES sample in reducing risk during research: One-half of the researchers use different languages to describe projects; nearly a quarter choose to adapt their research questions away from the most sensitive topics; some even have abandoned their project completely; a few scholars publish their article anonymously. Considering the sensitivity of many social research topics, self-censorship on internet behaviors for social scientists is an inevitable step to conduct research effectively and safely.

Empirical study: the case of feminist research in China

Identifying a research question: From researching feminist movements to feminist attitudes

In the context of censorship, the online social movement in China might develop in different patterns. Initially, I intended to analyze how the #MeToo movement in China builds up solidarity in feminist communities

and supposedly facilitates offline collective action. Sizeable research has investigated the polarizing function of social media (Mousavi & Gu, 2014), and the relationship between online and offline participation in a feminist/social movement (Flores, Gómez, Roa, & Whitson, 2018; Ogan, Giglou, & d'Haenens, 2016). But their empirical case analysis is not contextualized in authoritarian countries where censorship plays a critical role in movements organization. Although many females were empowered through the #MeToo movement, online censorship was deployed at the burgeoning stage of #MeToo in China (Yang, 2018), to dissolve the "uncertainties" of the state regime. Besides, China allows little space for NGOs and individuals to pursue right-based feminist advocacy, with feminists detained and relevant organizations curtailed (Jiang, 2019). Offline movements are thereby almost invisible, not to mention blooming nationally. In this situation, I reframed my research question and turned to study how discourses of feminist bloggers impact the attitudes of social media users on women's rights.

Confront online scrutiny: Blocked feminist bloggers and online questionnaire
One major impediment of my research on feminist bloggers is that internet censorship blocked representative bloggers during the #MeToo movement. Their blogs were deleted alongside. The entitled "#MeToo super-topic" (女权超话, discussion forum in Sina Weibo – the Chinese version of Twitter) was substantially cleared, only remaining a few blogs posted in English. This posed great difficulty for researchers to recover the information online. But there are still several ways to trace back the blocked accounts. For those feminist bloggers who were blocked previously, they would usually register another account and reassert their opinions and allegations on other women's rights topics. It provides me an opportunity to observe their tones, wording, as well as feminist attitudes and goals. Their strategies, with the experiences of being blocked once or more, to circumvent internet censorship also enables me to observe more than what I could see on other bloggers' homepages.

Collecting college students' feminist attitudes and their use of social media is the next and an essential step in my research. In the process of distributing questionnaires, however, I confronted internet censorship. Adopting an 11-item short form of Liberal Feminist Attitude and Ideology Scale (Morgan, 1996), I translated the test questions into Chinese without carefully censoring the wording. One day after launching the online questionnaire, the website requested me to upload personal information to ensure that the questionnaire could continue collecting responses. A few days later, a further request from the website asked for the seal of the working unit or school on "Data Use Agreement" (数据使用承诺), mentioning that my questionnaire involved sensitive words. By far, I was neither able to download my data from the website, nor ensure the safety of my personal information.

Self-censorship and alternative methods

After being blocked on the questionnaire website, I asked for help from my instructor to re-evaluate the wording. Some translations have room to negotiate to circumvent artificial intelligent filtering without changing their connotations. Some sensitive wordings might need to be substituted by other test questions in measuring the feminist attitudes of respondents.

Firstly, "feminist (女权)" and "citizen + movement (公民+运动)" on the questionnaire should be rephrased by "women's rights (女性权益)" and "people's movement (人民运动)." In a western context, feminist often appears in the discussion of civil rights. During the 1960s, the second-wave feminist movement was exactly influenced and inspired by the Civil Rights Movement (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). Inversely, authoritarian governments that try to restrain and suppress potential protests and uncertainties are cautious about feminist movements, so as to mitigate the threat of broader civil rights campaigns. Therefore, in order to circumvent keyword censoring, it is suggested to avoid wordings associated with defiance and demand for civil rights.

Secondly, the attitude question "A radical restructuring of society is needed to overcome status inequalities between sexes (为了转变目前性别不平等的状态，我们需要一个彻底的社会重构)" should be replaced by alternative questions. Though keyword filtering might not be able to identify the embedded idea of collective action, manual censorship sometimes would evaluate the questions if there is any other heedless miss. Indeed, the website declares that manual inspection would scan the overall design of the questionnaire once the artificial intelligent reports anomaly. A backup choice to measure feminist attitudes on collective action is "A 'women's movement' is basically irrelevant to the most vital concerns of our society (女性运动基本上已经脱离我们社会上最重要的关注点)."

In China, a wide range of topics and keywords are censored on the internet. For researchers who have never confronted online scrutiny, self-censorship can be a daunting task. Luckily, 13 lists of censored and sensitive Chinese keywords have been uploaded on the GitHub repository.[1] This dataset contains more than 9,000 words and phrases, including those in Chinese, English, pinyin, and a mixture of the three. Researchers could then re-examine their narratives referencing to these wordlists. One more method to ensure security is to use foreign online questionnaire websites. A few questionnaire tools developed by foreign companies could be accessed by Chinese IP addresses. I do not introduce specifics here to avoid tightening control on these websites.

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[1] The link to access Chinese-keywords lists https://github.com/jasonqng/chinese-keyword.

Concluding remarks

This article attempts to shed light on the impact of internet censorship on social science research. Whereas the censorship mechanism itself introduces abundant research opportunities to social scientists, researchers also confront online scrutiny during research activities. My feminist research experience in China provides a good illustration of the importance of contextualizing research questions under internet scrutiny as well as self-censoring online behaviors and data-collecting practices. The implication of online censorship in social research can be summarized in three aspects:

First and foremost, the changing institutional settings on online public communication requires a recontextualization of research questions. More specifically, the function of social media in precipitating collective actions cannot be overestimated in authoritarian countries with tight online censorship. Similarly, the development model of online social movements should not be analogically extrapolated from countries with open internet environment to authoritarian states.

Secondly, the information security of social scientists is not guaranteed when conducting online research activities in authoritarian states. Researchers are regularly required to upload personal information in order to obtain network data. The information is recorded into the database of the official departments, which left some potential troubles for the safety of researchers.

Lastly, the online data-collecting process might be interrupted by the censorship technology. On the one hand, the existing internet information might be a curtailed version, which means the crawled data cannot represent the comprehensive reality of historical events. On the other hand, researchers who collect survey data through domestic online tools take the risk of being blocked. Keyword filtering and other censorship techniques, cooperated with manual checking from the website, would forestall academic research activities that involve any sensitivity.

Online tools and abundant internet information should have empowered social scientists in conducting academic research. However, the very political nature of censorship technology is regulating the capacity and agency of researchers to develop their research topics and activities. In such a context, self-censorship does not mean to avoid any touch on the sensitivity in research topics, that is, to conform to the ultimate purpose of governmental surveillance. Instead, it should be regarded as a way to calibrate the risk and seek for an executable approach towards the research questions without immoderate political intervention, and finally propose a relatively complete picture of the society.

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