



# **Tinkering the Reality – How Chinese Online Media Adapt Censorship and Propaganda Techniques for the Wired World**

## **Research Seminar Series**

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## In the pre-Internet Era: February 1948



- Communist leader Klement Gottwald... was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.
- ***Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera, 1979**

## Four years later...



- Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history... Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head.
- ***Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera, 1979**

# Practice of Censorship, Anytime, Anywhere

- Historically, censorship can be traced back to a much early age of human society when hierarchy emerged, because power and knowledge are inextricably bound together (Jansen, 1988).
- Ironically, the first secular censorship office was established at Mainz, where Gutenberg lived, worked, and invented the printing press.
- At present, some major suppliers of surveillance technology hail from democratized countries, and they compete with China for sales in autocratic countries, such as Bahrain, and Sudan.

# Internet Censorship in China

- Starting from the 1990s, China devotes “substantial technical, financial, and human resources” to advance the censorial tools and has instituted “by far the most intricate filtering regime in the world” (Palfrey, 2010).
- China now languishes in 174/179 on *the Press Freedom Index* (Reporters without Borders, 2012).

# Definitions of Censorship

- “Censorship could be defined as the **systematic control** of the **content** of communication by a government through **various means**” (Peleg, 1993).
  1. **Systematic control** is a behavioral pattern that marks the distinction between censors and other inspectors, because
  2. Censors, normally by order of governments, try to expurgate **specific content** that carries inconvenient facts, thereby implying their processes are hardly separate incidents, and
  3. **Methods and means** censors employ to control the production and dissemination of content vary, ranging from legal and economic to physical.

# What's Propaganda?

- In fact, it's hard to define...
- It's **one-way communication**, compared to persuasion that's based on interaction.
- "Propaganda results in the **manipulation** of the mob by the elite."
- "Attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate thought by playing **prejudices** and **emotions**."
- -- Pratkanis & Turner (1996)

# A Psychological Definition

- Jowett and O'Donnell (2012)
- Propaganda is the **deliberate, systematic** attempt to shape **perceptions**, manipulate **cognitions**, and direct **behavior** to achieve a **response** that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.



# Deletion of Social Media, Sina Weibo in particular

- **Bamman** et al.'s (2012) claimed to be “the first large-scale analysis of political content censorship” that investigates the messages deleted from Sina Weibo, a Chinese equivalent to Twitter.
- Out of a random sample consisting of 1,308,430 messages, they found 212,583 non-spam posts, or **16.25%**, were deleted after the publication time from June 30 to July 25, 2011.
- Highly associated with deletion were **295 sensitive keywords** and the outlying provinces, e.g., **Tibet** and **Qinghai**, from where half of the messages vaporized.

# Differences Between Social Media and News Media

- **Chinese journalists** are more obliged and prepared to self-censor sensitive information, compared to ordinary **Chinese netizens**.
- Since any controversial issues are **pre-censored** in Chinese newsrooms, negative news stories mostly occur in poor provinces where local officials malpractice.

**“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”**

— Milan Kundera,  
*Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1979

11



Sweet dreams under ...