Censorship Can be Counterproductive:

Why Are Certain Kinds of Political Rumors More Credible than Others? A Mixed-Method Study of Chinese Social Media

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Abstract

Censorship constitutes an important pillar of effective governance in China. By drawing a connection between government censorship and media credibility, this paper addresses the following question: could government censorship be counter-productive by increasing the credibility of political rumors in China? Using a combination of statistical regressions and qualitative interviews, I find mixed evidence on the effectiveness of censorship in China. On one hand, the results suggest that government censorship can unexpectedly increase the credibility of politically sensitive information because people are more likely to believe in a rumor when they think it is more likely to be censored. On the other hand, the results also demonstrate that censorship can increase people's trust in state media over foreign news when it comes to a public crisis, even though citizens understand that the government censors and controls the official media.

Keywords: political communication, political rumor, social media, government censorship, China

Introduction

Political discourse in authoritarian regimes is characterized by three important tools, preference falsification, propaganda, and censorship, through which autocrats manage public grievances and maintain regime stability. While the effects of preference falsification and government propaganda are generally well understood by theories of collective mobilization, autocrat dilemma, signaling and manipulation, no comprehensive theories on government censorship have yet exists.[1]

Most literature on censorship focuses on the censoring logic and the consequences.[2] Neither topic is sufficiently explored, especially the latter, due to the distinctive characteristics of government censorship: invisibility and ambiguity. Invisibility refers to the "behind the scene" nature of censorship as authoritarian regimes tend to deny its existence publicly. Thus, regardless of its pervasiveness, censorship is less observable. Ambiguity refers to the uncertainty governments deliberately create around off-limit topics.[3] This ambiguity

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1. Timur Kuran, *Private truths, public lies: The social consequences of preference falsification* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Junyan Jiang and Dali L Yang, "Lying or believing? Measuring preference falsification from a political purge in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no. 5 (2016): 600–634; Ronald Wintrobe, "The tinpot and the totalitarian: An economic theory of dictatorship," *American political science review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 849–872; Haifeng Huang and Yao-Yuan Yeh, "Information from Abroad: Foreign Media, Selective Exposure and Political Support in China" [in en], *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (April 2019), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000739; Andrew T. Little, "Propaganda and credulity," *Games and Economic Behavior* 102 (March 2017): 224–232, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2016.12.006; Jidong Chen and Yiqing Xu, "Information manipulation and reform in authoritarian regimes," *Political Science Research and Methods* 5, no. 1 (2017): 163–178.

2. Peter Lorentzen, "China's Strategic Censorship" [in en], *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402–414, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12065; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–343; William R. Hobbs and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Sudden Censorship Can Increase Access to Information" [in English], *The American Political Science Review; Washington* 112, no. 3 (August 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000084.

3. Bryan Druzin and Gregory S. Gordon, "Authoritarianism and the Internet" [in en], *Law & Social Inquiry* 43, no. 4 (2018): 1427–1457, https://doi.org/10.1111/lsi.12301.

often induces self-censorship and prevents people from strategic evasion.[4] Thus, unlike propaganda, which is openly guided by ideologies or political agendas, identifying the objectives of censorship is harder.

To further understand the potential effects of government censorship, this paper asks: why are certain kinds of political rumors more credible than others in China? The hypothesis connects people's sensitivity towards government censorship with the credibility of political rumors in the context of increasing political polarization and media distrust. By situating the research question in an up-to-date political environment, this research reveals a better understanding of why state censorship can be effective and counter-productive simultaneously. Also, this paper identifies four factors that are related to people's sensitivity towards government censorship when using social media.

The research question of credibility has real-world implications since the spread of rumors on social media is becoming a serious problem in China, especially during the recent covid crisis. Moreover, as political polarization has become an increasingly important topic, this research suggests how authoritarian regimes can "guide" the political discussion online by fostering media bias in favor of themselves.

Hypothesis

My primary hypothesis is that citizens are more likely to believe political rumors which they perceive as more likely to be censored. I argue that similar to their ability to understand government propaganda, citizens learn patterns of government censorship through

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4. Druzin and Gordon, "Authoritarianism and the Internet."

their daily interactions.[5] Then, citizens on their own develop which contets are politically sensitive. Since citizens can not distinguish government censorship from the deletion of rumors, they will regard the censoring behavior as positively related to credibility: the government conceals truth that holds it accountable. Thus, citizens tend to believe a story containing cues suggesting higher censorship likelihood.

Several secondary hypotheses on what affects people's judgment of censorship likelihood supplement theory proposed: (1) People with more political knowledge and education will be more sensitive to government censorship. (2) People who are more aware of censorship in general will be more sensitive to government censorship. (3) People with more liberal political ideologies, which advocate freedom of speech, will be more sensitive to government censorship.

Understanding Media Credibility

Media credibility is crucial in political communication: if people do not believe in the political message conveyed, they will not experience an attitudinal shift and thus will not react accordingly.[6] Therefore, to make the information credible matters for all kinds of message senders,whether news agencies, democracies, or autocrats. The literature finds three factors affecting media credibility: source, medium and message.[7]

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5. Little, "Propaganda and credulity."

6. Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," in *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*, ed. Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, Springer Series in Social Psychology (New York, NY: Springer New York, 1986), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4964-1_1.

7. Miriam J. Metzger et al., "Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment," *Annals of the International*

Medium Credibility

Theories on medium credibility are perhaps the oldest ones. The technological determinism provides the foundation of theories in this field.[8] Developed from the technological determinism, the media dependency theory stated that people regard a certain type of medium as more credible when they are exposed to the medium more.[9] In the digital age, people's trust in the Internet as a medium is found to be a generalization of their trust in multiple online sources based on user experiences. Consequently, more frequent exposure to a certain kind of medium can increase its credibility through an accumulation of user experience.[10] Besides the medium dependency, the social-economic status, mobility and level education may also affect people's trust in different media.[11]

Some distinct features of social media also bring new factors affecting medium credibility to scholars' attention. A recent theory on medium credibility concludes that interactiv-

Communication Association 27, no. 1 (January 2003): 293–335, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2003.11679029.

8. Marshall McLuhan 1911-1980, *Understanding media; the extensions of man,* [in English], [1st ed.], vii, 359 p. (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964).

9. Cecilie Gaziano and Kristin McGrath, *The Media Credibility Problem: Putting the Research into Perspective* [in en] (May 1985); Cecilie Gaziano and Kristin McGrath, "Measuring the concept of credibility," *Journalism quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1986): 451–462.

10. William H. Dutton and Adrian Shepherd, "Trust in the Internet as an experience technology," *Information, Communication & Society* 9, no. 4 (August 2006): 433–451, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180600858606.

11. John Newhagen and Clifford Nass, "Differential Criteria for Evaluating Credibility of Newspapers and TV News" [in English], *Journalism Quarterly; Columbia* 66, no. 2 (1989): 277–281, 284; Scott R. Maier, "Accuracy Matters: A Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility" [in en], *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (September 2005): 533–551, https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200304; Bruce H. Westley and Werner J. Severin, "Some Correlates of Media Credibility" [in en], *Journalism Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1964): 325–335, https://doi.org/10.1177/107769906404100301.

ity is positively related to media credibility.[12] Here, interactivity refers to the psychological factors characterizing the likelihood of receivers' engagement in social interactions with others.[13] This theory is important for the study of social media because traditional forms of mass communication limit interactions between receivers and agencies. However, interacting with agents on social media becomes easy, and the sense of participation can influence people's perception of credibility.

Nevertheless, the medium credibility is of less concern for my research because this paper focuses on a single, frequently used social medium in China. Yet, the theories on medium credibility still give a context for the study: Since WeChat is a popular medium and enjoys high interactivity among users, a rumor spread on WeChat will cause significant harm to the government if found credible.

<div align="center">Source Credibility</div>

Theories on source credibility traditionally focus on the reputation of news agencies or established institutions. A source is credible if people regard the agencies providing the information as reputable and professional[14] However, the situation has changed dramatically as news sources are no longer institutions: individuals can become influential sources on

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12. Ruohan Li and Ayoung Suh, "Factors Influencing Information credibility on Social Media Platforms: Evidence from Facebook Pages," *Procedia Computer Science*, The Third Information Systems International Conference 2015, 72 (January 2015): 314–328; A. Algarni, Y. Xu, and T. Chan, "Measuring Source Credibility of Social Engineering Attackers on Facebook," in *2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)* (January 2016), 3686–3695, https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2016.460.

13. Louisa Ha and E. Lincoln James, "Interactivity reexamined: A baseline analysis of early business web sites," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42, no. 4 (September 1998): 457–474, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838159809364462.

14. Metzger et al., "Credibility for the 21st Century"; Thomas J. Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye, "Cruising is believing? Comparing internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly; Thousand Oaks* 75, no. 2 (1998): 325–340.

social media as well. For individual sources, such as personal blogs, recipients are more likely to consider factors related to bloggers' personal information, such as offline identities and personal values, when judging the credibility of sources.[15] Funding for the sources also matters as public broadcasts generally do better in providing accurate and unbiased political information compared to privately-funded broadcasts.[16] However, the conclusion becomes ambiguous in authoritarian regimes due to government censorship.

The general media distrust and political polarization may affect source credibility as well. Today, the political elites in the United States often discredit news agencies online to serve political ends.[17] The increasing distrust in news sources fueled by the negative information from political elites strengthens the perception of source credibility based on partisanship. People with more polarized political attitudes are found more likely to differentiate the credibility of news sources based on their political preferences.[18] Such judgement of credibility based on partisanship is more emotional than logical. Consequently, non-conforming evidence can hardly serve the purpose of "fact checking" and may correct the misinterpretations of source credibility only temporarily at the very best.[19]

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15. Tracy Rickman Cosenza, Michael R. Solomon, and Wi-suk Kwon, "Credibility in the blogosphere: A study of measurement and influence of wine blogs as an information source" [in en], *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 14, no. 2 (2015): 71–91, https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1496.

16. Stuart Soroka et al., "Auntie Knows Best? Public Broadcasters and Current Affairs Knowledge," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 4 (2013): 719–739.

17. Jonathan M Ladd, *Why Americans hate the news media and how it matters* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Jana Laura Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler, "Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 43, no. 2 (2019): 97–116.

18. Natalie Jomini Stroud and Jae Kook Lee, "Perceptions of cable news credibility," *Mass Communication and Society* 16, no. 1 (2013): 67–88.

19. Adam J Berinsky, "The birthers are (still) back," *YouGov. Retrieved July* 1 (2012): 2012.

While most research on political partisanship investigates how it affects the quality of democracies domestically, my research sheds light on how it functions for autocrats in an international context. The relationship between political partisanship and source credibility provides authoritarian regimes with a new way to conduct government censorship by discrediting news sources criticizing them. For instance, the Chinese government has long categorized news sources like *CNN* and the *New York Times* as "anti-China" or "discriminatory" to undermine their credibility.

Message Credibility

The keystone theory on message credibility is that people focus on informational cues. A logical and official style of narration can increase the credibility of the message.[20] Similarly, a cue signaling professionalism can also increase the credibility.[21] Narrative tactics affecting people's emotions can persuade receivers about the message credibility as well. People's attention to emotionally provocative information is a socio-cognitive effect and has little to do with the stories' underlying realities.[22] This finding provides an important insight for the study of political rumors: such rumors use sensational cues to arouse emotional responses from receivers and improve their credibility independent of the fabricated stories.

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20. D. Harrison McKnight and Charles J. Kacmar, "Factors and Effects of Information Credibility," in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Electronic Commerce*, ICEC '07, event-place: Minneapolis, MN, USA (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1145/1282100.1282180.

21. H. McKnight and C. Kacmar, "Factors of Information Credibility for an Internet Advice Site," vol. 6 (January 2006), 113b–113b, https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2006.181.

22. Igartua Juan-José and Cheng Lifen, "Moderating Effect of Group Cue While Processing News on Immigration: Is the Framing Effect a Heuristic Process?," *Journal of Communication* 59, no. 4 (December 2009): 726–749, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01454.x.

My research adds a new dimension to the understanding of message credibility: Do government censorship interacts with informational cues and thus affects media credibility? This approach differs from the traditional way: I investigate not how cues can operate independently, but how cues interact with a larger environment and thus produce interesting outcomes.

Political Communication in Autocracies

The study of media credibility in autocracies can differ drastically from that in democracies as the government intervenes in political communication. Aggarwal (1989) directly claims that the vulnerability of press in India is due to its relationship with the government.[23] The problem is worse in authoritarian regimes, which violently suppress the freedom of expression.[24] Therefore, external interventions from authoritarian governments may change how people perceive media credibility. Building a bridge between authoritarian politics and media credibility is thus important to reveal how autocratic machines may influence the process of political communication.

Government Censorship and Dictators' Dilemma

The literature on domestic censorship in China usually focus on the limitation of press freedom through party regulation and violence against journalists.[25] Recently, Xi's ad-

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23. S. K. Aggarwal 1938-, *Media credibility* [in English], 1st ed., xii, 246 p.; (New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications, 1989).

24. Brad Adams, *"You will be harassed and detained": media freedoms under assault in China ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.* [in English], 38 p.; (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

25. Jonathan Hassid, *China's unruly journalists: how committed professionals are changing the People's Republic* [in English], xx, 179 pages; (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, 2016).

ministration has further tightened its control over universities and established a "seven No" (七不讲) regulation on off-limit topics in universities.[26] The rise of cross-border surveillance capitalism also strengthened the Chinese government's ability to monitor its citizen.[27] Many advanced technologies, such as facial identification, data mining and personal algorithms, have the potential to be transformed into surveillance tools by authoritarian regimes.[28] Consequently, government censorship could largely alter the contents of political messages and co-opt the news sources. As media credibility is related to the credibility of message and source, it is reasonable to expect that the censorship will affect media credibility as an external factor.

Another reason censorship affects communication process is the dictator's dilemma.[29] To comprehensively understand the citizens' attitudes, the autocrat wants the information exchange to be transparent; however, to conceal unfavorable information, the autocrat wants to limit the free exchange of information simultaneously.[30] These conflicting goals tend to create an information disparity between the government and citizens on sensitive issues, such

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26. Mu Tian, *The Forbidden Garden: Censorship in China* [in CN], First Edition (Taipei: Yun Chen Publisher, May 2018).

27. United States. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *China's censorship of the Internet and social media: the human toll and trade impact : hearing before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, first session, November 17, 2011.* [in English], iii, 73 p. : (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2012).

28. Shoshana Zuboff, "Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization" [in English], *Journal of Information Technology; London* 30, no. 1 (March 2015), https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5.

29. Wintrobe, "The tinpot and the totalitarian: An economic theory of dictatorship."

30. Bruce J. Dickson, *The dictator's dilemma: the Chinese Communist Party's strategy for survival* [in English], xii, 352 pages (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

as environmental protection.[31] It is hard to tell whether the government is telling the "whole truth" when citizens can not observe the level of government censorship. Since the political credibility largely relies on how much citizens trust the public government discourse in a single-party regime, the dictator's dilemma on whether to tighten or loosen media control poses a significant problem to the legitimacy of autocrats.[32]

Therefore, censorship intervenes into the communication process and could affect media credibility: either because the media control could directly affect the message and sources, or because the dictator's dilemma poses a question for the government to figure out whether the official narratives are actually accepted by its citizens. Though few studies directly explore the relationship between censorship and media credibility, several important works hints about the potential link between these two concepts.

Government Censorship and Media Credibility

First, the studies conducted on censorship, officially stated as public opinion management (輿情管理) in China, directly imply that the final goal of the management is to convince people about the official narration. Xiong (2016) points out that "to cope with public opinion in the digital era, the mainstream media should react quickly when there is a negative incident and the social media should help to promote positive attitudes among

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31. Zheng Su and Tianguang Meng, "Selective responsiveness: Online public demands and government responsiveness in authoritarian China," *Social Science Research*, Special issue on Big Data in the Social Sciences, 59 (September 2016): 52–67; Guizhen He, Arthur P. J. Mol, and Yonglong Lu, "Trust and Credibility in Governing China's Risk Society," *Environmental Science & Technology* 46, no. 14 (July 2012): 7442–7443, https://doi.org/10.1021/es302429e.

32. Mary Elizabeth Gallagher, *Authoritarian legality in China: law, workers, and the state* [in English], xviii, 252 pages (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

citizens by spreading official narrations on the events."[33] (direct quote: "主流媒体应快速反应，积极主动的通过公正的权威的新闻报道、分析和评论来疏导公众情绪") Therefore, at the core of this public opinion management strategy is persuasion and credibility. The government wants to use credible narration to guide online discussion away from undesirable directions. A control of online discussions may also introduce the mere exposure effect to increase the credibility of official narratives by presenting internet users with only pro-government information.

Furthermore, the technology advancement enables a larger role of government censorship in the communication process. Poell and Dijck (2015) point out that, though the government is unable to control the thoughts of people directly, they can still control the communication process via a biased algorithm.[34] In China, government tightly monitor most social media and send out instructions on what contents should be promoted among users.[35]

Moreover, citizens' perception of the media censorship alters their understanding of politically sensitive information. Huang (2017) points out that the credibility of rebuttals to political rumors in authoritarian regimes differs significantly in credibility according to the source: whether it's official, quasi-official or non-official.[36] Due to the existence of censorship,

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33. Yachuan Xiong, "Research on the Formation and Coping Strategy of Public Opinion Violation in the Era of Micro-blog: A Case Study of Operation Room Self-timer Case" [in CN], *Journal of Hubei Adult Education Institute* 22, no. 1 (January 2016): 71–75.

34. Thomas Poell and Jose van Dijck, "Social Media and Journalistic Independence" [in English], in *Media independence : working with freedom or working for free?*, xii, 291 pages; (New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, 2015).

35. Tian, *The Forbidden Garden: Censorship in China*.

36. Haifeng Huang, "A War of (Mis)Information: The Political Effects of Rumors and Rumor Rebuttals in an Authoritarian Country" [in English], *British Journal of Political Science; Cambridge* 47, no. 2 (April 2017): 283–311, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000253.

people tend to believe quasi or non-official sources on politically sensitive topics. This is contrary to the story of public broadcasts in democratic regimes shown by Soroka et al. (2013). Stockman and Gallagher's argument about media credibility also finds that people are generally more persuaded by news from semi-official sources, especially if they are written in a realistic way (not written like a propaganda). So they argue that often in China, the content between official and semi-official news is not that different, but the presentation is different.[37]

Finally, citizens will naturally search for more credible information on sensitive issues and their searching behavior could hardly be deterred by government censorship. Roberts (2018) argues that censorship would trigger users to talk more about the politically sensitive topics during the days after their online posts are deleted.[38] Hobbs and Roberts (2018) also argue that the ban on foreign social media use, such as the use of Snapchat, can increase citizens' access to sensitive information as people are motivated by the new censorship to seek out avenues for evasion.[39] The authors argue that citizens prefer preserving their media consumption pattern to complying with the government censorship. Then, after citizens find a way to evade censorship, they would naturally consume and search for information previously censored.[40] An increased exposure to foreign sources and sensitive information

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37. Daniela Stockmann and Mary E. Gallagher, "Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China" [in en], *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 4 (April 2011): 436–467, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010394773.

38. Margaret E Roberts, *Censored: distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

39. Hobbs and Roberts, "How Sudden Censorship Can Increase Access to Information."

40. Hobbs and Roberts.

ruled out by the government can erode citizens' trust in the incumbent and further discredit certain kinds of information.[41] Consequently, censorship may affect media credibility by altering people's perception on different kinds of sources and contents.

My research seeks to further understand how government censorship may help increase or decrease the credibility of information by shaping citizens' daily media consumption behaviors or political attitudes. It's an informative extension of the previous research in this field because it reflects how citizens react to government censorship when they encounter rumors that can not be proved or falsified immediately. It may also helps us to better understand why government censorship can have mixed effects for the authoritarian regimes.

The Survey Experiment

This paper adopts a within-subject experimental design and has three independent experiments each with a different treatment, but the same control. Treatments are formed around factors that may influence the perceived level of censorship likelihood based on two articles investigating how the Chinese government identifies the risk of a public opinion crisis and practices censorship.[42]

The first experiment distinguishes whether the source is subject to censorship (T_1). I regard sources within mainland China as subject to censorship ($Z = 1$) and foreign sources

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41. Huang and Yeh, "Information from Abroad."

42. Chang-bo Fu and Xiao-ke Guo, "Risk Evaluation Index System of Public Sentiment Based on Analytic Hierarchy Process," *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science Version)* 6, no. 1 (2017): 150–157; Yuan Dai et al., "Analysis on the construction of opinion management system in China," *zhuantiyanjiu*, April 2010, https://doi.org/10.3969.

as not ($Z = 0$). The second experiment distinguishes whether the information involves a speculation of government corruption (T_2). $Z = 1$ if it involves; $Z = 0$ if not. The third experiment distinguishes whether the information calls for a collective action (T_3). $Z = 1$ if yes; $Z = 0$ if not. All treatments are represented as explicit cues in the information. A 2018 vaccine crisis is chosen as the prototype of the political rumors used in the experiments.[43]

- Control: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Xinhua News.*

- Treatment Group on Source: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Lianhe Zaobao*, a foreign news media located in Singapore.

- Treatment Group on Government Criticism: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Xinhua News*, and a speculation on government corruption related to government officials in Beijing.

- Treatment Group on Collective Action: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Xinhua News*, and a call for collective action.

Sampling

The online survey experiments consist of two pilot experiments with 150 samples each and a formal survey experiment with 630 samples recruited from mainland China by Quadratics. Participants are randomly assigned to each of the three treatment groups without pre-screening on demographics.

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43. See https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-44920324, http://www.xinhuanet. com/politics/2018-07/27/c_1123187880.htm, https://theinitium.com/article/20180722-mainland-king-of-the-vaccine/, and https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/huanjing/ql1-07262018092049.html

Admittedly, an ideal sample would be random and recruited from average cities within China, covering a wide range of demographic distributions.[44] However, to recruit an ideal sample is practically difficult. Since censorship is a sensitive topic, the government may intervene if a massive recruitment is conducted on field. Therefore, the targeted sample population is restricted to volunteers among internet users aged between 18 and 55. This sample population is justifiable as the government report shows over 70% of all *netizens* in China are aged between 18 and 55, and a person has to be over 16 before he or she is fully responsible for spreading political rumors online.[45] Thus, though subject to certain limitations, such as the voluntary response biases and disproportional regional representations, this sample population is easier to target and has a potential for generalization.

Although the online survey samples are found to be biased towards more educated respondents, this is an acceptable drawback due to practical concerns.[46] Also, theoretically, citizens with higher education will be more sensitive to censorship, yet less susceptible to rumors. Therefore, a sample population with higher education is biasing against the hypotheses and will not pose severe problems to causal inferences.

<div align="center">Qualitative Interviews</div>

The semi-structured interviews are conducted by a snowball sampling in the United States among Chinese students and scholars who are exposed to government censorship in

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44. Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control."

45. CNNIC, *The 43rd China Statistical Report on Internet Development* (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019).

46. Xiaojun Li, Weiyi Shi, and Boliang Zhu, "The face of internet recruitment: Evaluating the labor markets of online crowdsourcing platforms in China," *Research & Politics* 5, no. 1 (2018): 2053168018759127.

China previously. The main focus of these semi-structured interviews are the following: whether the interviewees think there is any differences between the pieces of information they see on social media and whether the differences will lead to a varied probability of being censored; whether the interviewees find the pieces of information credible and why; whether the censorship likelihood serves as a factor for interviewees to determine the credibility of information online in their daily lives. I'm also interested in how interviewees understand the concept of government censorship and how well they understand the censorship practices in mainland China. Since the sample collected is not random, it will not be representative in terms of constructing a causal inference solely from the interview data.[47] Therefore, the interview data are much more useful in supporting and explaining the empirical regularity identified by the survey experiment in this study. As will be shown in the discussion of pilot results, the qualitative data is critical in explaining both the empirical regularities, and anomalous patterns, in the data collected.

Quantitative Results

Instead of directly supporting or refuting the hypotheses, the data illustrates a more complicated picture, signaling both positive and negative effects of government censorship. Government censorship is found effective because it prevents citizens from believing rumors of China mentioning a foreign news source when it comes to the public health incident. However, government censorship is also found counter-productive because citizens who are

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47. Layna Mosley, *Interview research in political science* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

more aware of, and have better understanding about, government censorship are more likely to believe in rumors which they perceived as likely to be censored.

Results of the Additive Regression Model on Media Credibility

The direct treatment effect is only found in the experimental group alternating the source and the result suggests that respondents find information on public health incidents reported by *Xinhua*, the official party media outlet, more credible even though the information is censored.

Table 1: Total Treatment Effects for Different Experimental Groups

	Dependent variable:		
	Credibility		
	Source	Government	Collective Action
Treatment	−0.395***	0.003	−0.040
	(0.092)	(0.087)	(0.084)
Constant	5.245***	5.178***	5.131***
	(0.065)	(0.062)	(0.060)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.042	0.00000	0.001
Adjusted R^2	0.039	-0.002	-0.002
Residual Std. Error (df = 418)	0.947	0.894	0.864
F Statistic (df = 1; 418)	18.207***	0.001	0.229

Note: see appendix for more information   *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The negative treatment effect found in the experiment suggests the effectiveness of government censorship from two perspectives. On one hand, the citizens are prevented from believing the foreign news, which is not censored, in the first place. On the other hand, this tendency to discredit foreign media will decrease citizens' exposure to the alternative

explanations on controversial issues: such as the protection of human rights or the protests in Hong Kong. By ruling out the potential alternatives, the party is more likely to succeed in its goal of controlling the right to speak (话语权).

On the other hand, the lack of treatment effects in the other two experimental groups may also suggest the effectiveness of censorship in two different ways. One possibility is that government censorship prevents from citizens believing in scandals until the party confirms it; while the other possibility is that the citizens will self-censor because they understand spreading such information against the government may have legal ramifications. These two potential explanations are supported by answers to the open ended questions incorporated into the survey experiments, where respondents suggest that they won't spread or trust the rumors on government corruption until they are published via the official media outlet.

It is worth noting that these results are time-sensitive. The recent rise of fake news, regime-sponsored disinformation campaigns and extreme political partisanship could have significantly affected the source and message credibility of any information online. Without panel data or time-series data, it is hard to determine whether or not the direct treatment effect is related to the larger media environment. In other words, Chinese citizens may have tended to believe more in foreign sources years ago, but not anymore. Another possibility is due to government propaganda because the party has been portraying foreign media as persistently biased against China, after 2008. Therefore, the experimental result shown on the alternation of sources should not be interpreted as robust across time. It is hard to conclude whether the treatment effect is a time-invariant result or is a context-specific result, even if it has profound implications on why government censorship could be effective in China today.

However, it would be improper to conclude that government censorship in China is working without any flaws. In all three experiments, the censorship likelihood of the information is found to be positively related to the credibility. While Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the variables without controlling any co-variates, the regression results with controlled variables give a consistent result as well. Another interesting pattern we can observe from the figure is that the data points are concentrated in the upper triangle along the 45-degree line. This suggests that the scale of variation in response to media credibility largely depends on the censorship likelihood: the variation in credibility measurement decreases as the censorship likelihood increases. Therefore, it's possible that there is an interaction between the treatment and whether respondents regard the information as highly likely to be censored. Also, it's worth noting that the pattern is consistent across all three groups even if total treatment effects are not found in the experimental groups other than the one on alternating the source. In the following sections, I will examine whether the censorship likelihood has an interaction effect on the outcome in the model and what explains the steady pattern across the experimental groups even when no treatment effect is found.

Other factors, such as the prior knowledge of government censorship, the general perception on government censorship, media bias, and intention to self-censor, are found related to the result as well. These co-relations allow us to peek into how personal characteristics can complicate the picture when discussing media credibility in an authoritarian regime. They also demonstrate the fact that different groups of citizens may react differently to the same political rumor.
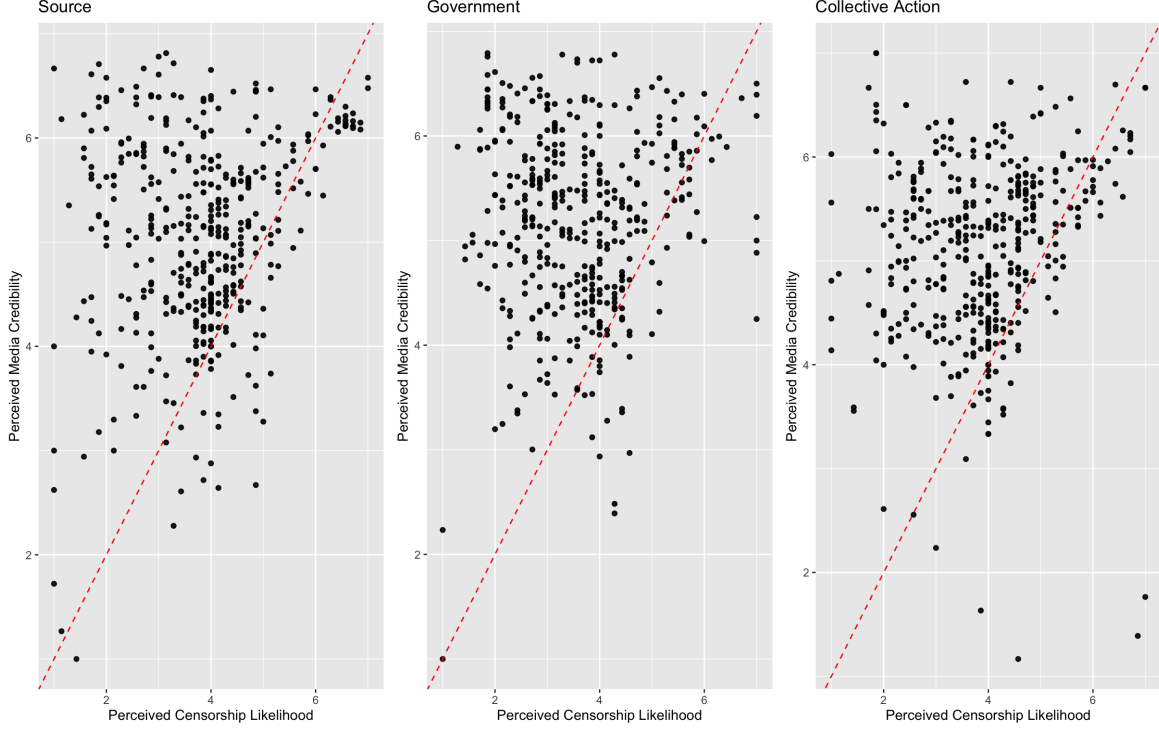
Figure 1: How censorship likelihood of the information is positively related to media credibility across different experimental groups

In general, if respondents are more sophisticated in terms of understanding government censorship (e.g. who conducts the actual deletion online, what kinds of materials are subject to censorship, etc.), then they are more likely to believe in rumors spreading online. Also, respondents' general perception on government censorship will have an effect on how they view the online information. If respondents are more aware of the existence of government censorship in general (e.g. they regard the media environment in China as not free and censored), then they are less likely to believe in the information online. Similarly, if respondents regard the information online as biased in general, then they are less likely to believe it. Finally, if respondents show a higher intention of self-censoring, then they are more likely to believe in rumors online, even if they are not likely to spread the information themselves as suggested by their qualitative responses. These results suggest how the general distrust

of online media and media consumption habits related to the existence of state censorship can alter the perception of information credibility in authoritarian regimes.

Table 2: Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics

	Dependent variable:		
	Perceived Media Credibility		
	Group:Source	Group:Government	Group:Collective Action
Treatment	−0.376***	−0.001	−0.053
	(0.086)	(0.070)	(0.077)
Censor_Likelihood	0.203***	0.132***	0.152***
	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.050)
Political_Attitude	0.020	−0.047	0.031
	(0.046)	(0.037)	(0.039)
Censor_Knowledge	0.198***	0.221***	0.142**
	(0.062)	(0.048)	(0.055)
Selfcensor	0.007	0.218***	0.174***
	(0.007)	(0.033)	(0.036)
Censor_Perception	−0.122**	−0.282***	−0.189***
	(0.054)	(0.038)	(0.053)
Bias	−0.136***	−0.079***	−0.035
	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.029)

Note: results of other variables neglected, see appendix $^{*}p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

While the distrust in media in democracies is largely related to partisanship and polarization, the results found in China, an authoritarian regime, are less related to political ideology.[48] Since the political attitude measurement in this paper is adopted from Pan and Xu (2018), measuring the liberal ideology from political, social, and economic perspectives, the results suggest that partisanship of left and right would matter little in China when discussing media credibility.[49] A potential explanation to this phenomenon is the potential

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48. Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker, "Political trust in a cynical age," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 49–70.

49. Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, "China's ideological spectrum," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 254–273.

difference in what "partisanship" means in different countries. Since there doesn't exist a regular shift of power induced by citizens in authoritarian regimes, the political debates are less likely to be motivated by liberal or conservative ideologies. Instead, the partisanship in China is more centralized around the approval and disapproval of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, I tested the relationship between respondents' satisfaction with the current political system in China and the perceived media credibility. As summarized by Figure 2, the results remain the same and no clear patterns could be found. The coefficients are also not significant in an additive regression model. Consequently, the political partisanship is not likely to affect media credibility in China.
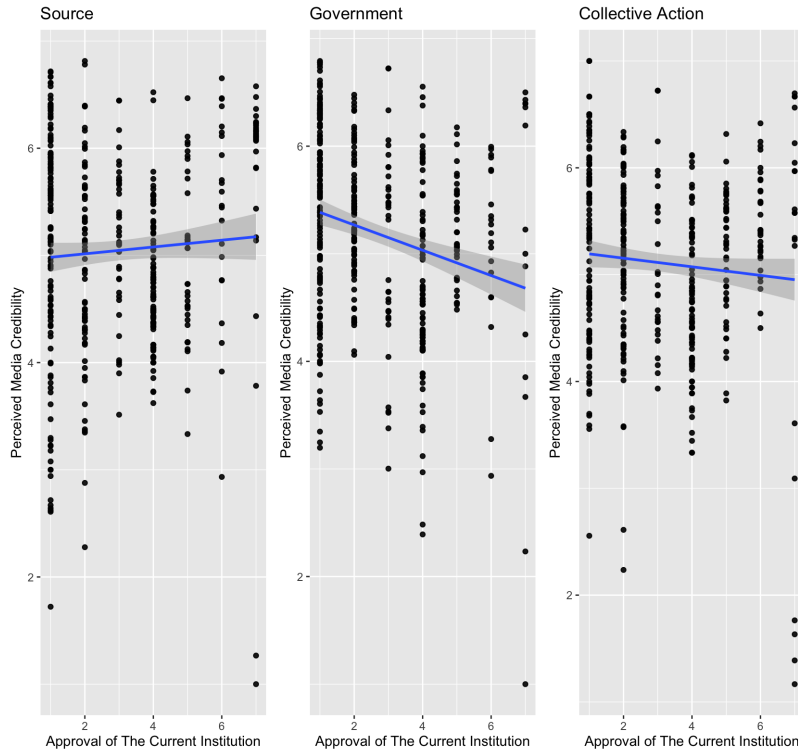

Figure 2: Relationship between respondents' support of the current political system controlled by CCP and the perceived information credibility

Table 3: Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics (Substituting the Political Attitude Dimension with the Approval/Disapproval of the CCP governance dimension)

	Dependent variable:		
	Perceived Media Credibility		
	Group:Source	Group:Government	Group:Collective Action
Treatment	−0.378***	−0.001	−0.053
	(0.086)	(0.070)	(0.077)
Censor_Likelihood	0.209***	0.130**	0.167**
	(0.056)	(0.044)	(0.050)
CCP_Disapproval	−0.013	−0.041	−0.033
	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.029)
Censor_Knowledge	0.204**	0.222***	0.144**
	(0.062)	(0.048)	(0.055)
Selfcensor	0.014	0.213***	0.165***
	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.036)
Censor_Perception	−0.100*	−0.279***	−0.155**
	(0.055)	(0.038)	(0.052)
Bias	−0.134***	−0.075**	−0.030
	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.029)

Note: In comparison to Table 2 $\qquad$ *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The Interactive Effects on Media Credibility

Next, in order to demonstrate whether censorship likelihood contributes to the credibility of political rumors online as suggested by my hypothesis, I will analyze the data by the interactive regression model. The two variables I'm interested in are respondents' judgments on the censorship likelihood of the information, and how well they understand government censorship. The former variable is tested to validate my hypothesis and the second variable is of interest due to the results shown by the additive regression models.

Table 4: Additive and Interactive Models for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:				
	Credibility				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	−0.395***	−0.423***	−0.395***	−0.973***	−0.955***
	(0.092)	(0.090)	(0.090)	(0.293)	(0.319)
Censor_Likelihood		0.175***		0.102*	
		(0.037)		(0.052)	
Censor_Knowledge			0.195***		0.126**
			(0.038)		(0.053)
Treatment:Censor_Likelihood				0.144**	
				(0.073)	
Treatment:Censor_Knowledge					0.138*
					(0.076)
Constant	5.245***	4.589***	4.455***	4.865***	4.735***
	(0.065)	(0.151)	(0.166)	(0.206)	(0.226)
Observations	420	420	420	420	420
R^2	0.042	0.091	0.099	0.100	0.106
Adjusted R^2	0.039	0.087	0.095	0.093	0.100
Residual Std. Error	0.947 (df = 418)	0.924 (df = 417)	0.920 (df = 417)	0.920 (df = 416)	0.917 (df = 416)
F Statistic	18.207*** (df = 1; 418)	20.980*** (df = 2; 417)	22.890*** (df = 2; 417)	15.377*** (df = 3; 416)	16.462*** (df = 3; 416)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Then, as illustrated by Table 4, interactions are found for both variables of interest, and the monotonicity assumption of analysis is guaranteed by a posterior check on the data, as illustrated by Figure 1. The censorship likelihood does contribute positively to the credibility of political rumors online as suggested by the hypothesis. This suggests that government censorship could be counterproductive because when citizens regard a piece of politically sensitive information as more likely to be subject to government censorship, they are more likely to believe in the information, even when it's actually a rumor. Also, respondents' possession of knowledge on government censorship contributes positively to the media credibility. This suggests that citizens who are well educated in terms of the media environment in China will more likely to believe in the politically sensitive information online. However, the magnitude of the interactive effects is much less than the magnitude of the direct treatment effect in the interactive models. This suggests that citizens who

are more sensitive and knowledgeable about government censorship still possibly believe in official media outlets more than a foreign news source, even though they understand that domestic news is censored. A potential explanation for this phenomenon is that sophisticated users understand state censorship as deletion and selective exposure more than spreading misinformation. Therefore, they are more likely to regard the state media as "telling the truth in part" instead of "lying".

<div align="center">Who is More Sensitive Towards the Government Censorship</div>

The censorship likelihood variable in the model, as suggested in the measurement section, captures how sensitive the respondent is towards the government censorship. Then, what factors are related to respondents' sensitivity towards the government censorship is also of interest. By applying a simple additive regression model, I find several variables that are correlated with respondents' ratings on the censorship likelihood. However, it is important to understand that the regression results for this section are not obtained in a randomized experiment like the previous additive and interactive regression models on media credibility. Thus, the relationships identified should be understood as mere associations instead of causal inferences. Also, the results are conditioned on a given piece of rumor and thus no comparisons can be made between different pieces of information since no mediation effect is found.

First of all, respondents' knowledge on censorship is positively related to their judgment on whether a piece of information is likely to be censored. This should not be surprising since citizens who are well-informed should understand censorship better and thus are more likely to figure out the information presented is subject censorship. Nevertheless, respon-

dents' political knowledge of general facts (e.g. who is the president of China) is found irrelevant to their sensitivity towards government censorship. This indicates the possibility that citizens of China can be well educated, politically sophisticated, yet ignorant or indifferent towards government censorship. Or, as will be demonstrated in later sections, some elites in China believe that censorship is justified and beneficial for "social and economic stability." This indication cannot be proved by the data and models within this project but is definitely worth future studies.
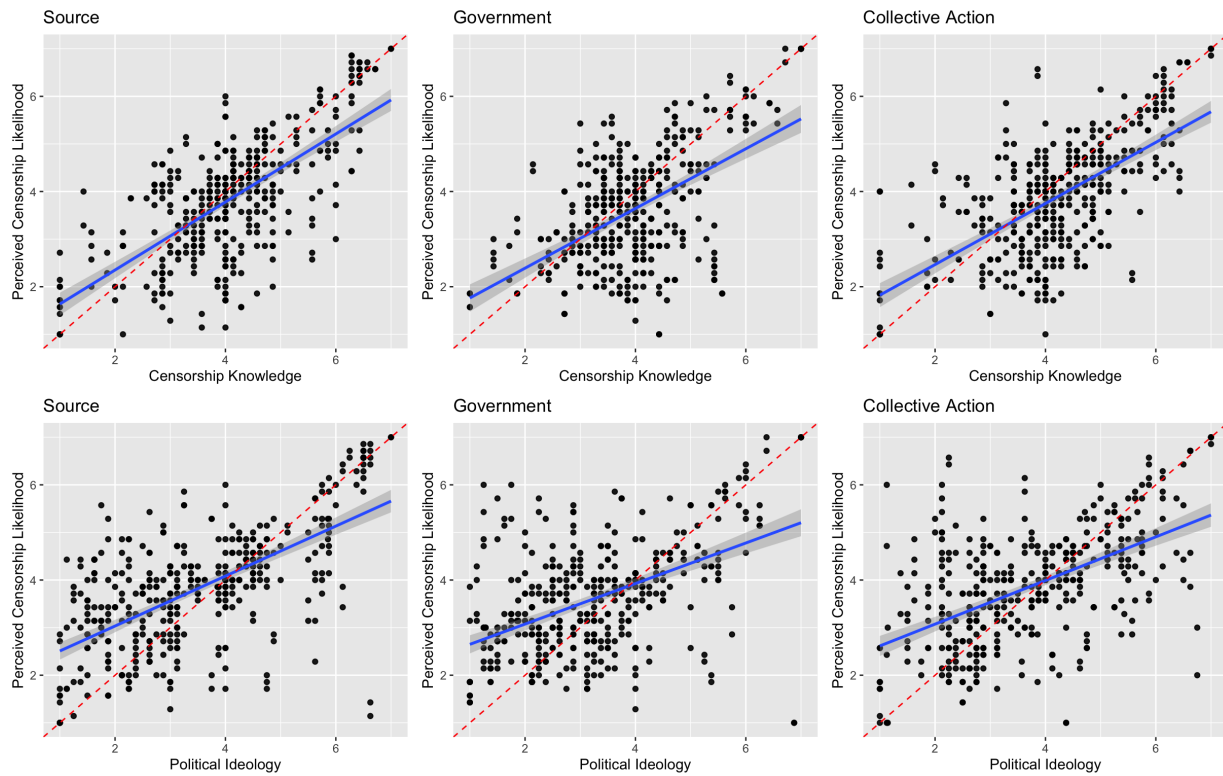

Figure 3: The Co-relation between Censorship Knowledge, Political Attitude and People's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (without controlling for any other demographic or political characteristics)

Political attitudes are also found to be relevant. People who favor more liberal political ideology are more likely to label the information as "subject to censorship." However, as illustrated by Figure 3, the variance of the data for political attitude is a little bit larger than

the variance of data for the censorship knowledge. This suggests that the political ideology may have a varied influence on people's sensitivity towards government censorship. One plausible explanation for the phenomenon is that citizens with different political ideologies may share a similar view on the government censorship. This explanation is supported by the qualitative interview data, as will be shown in later sections.

Table 5: Relationship between One's Support of the Current Political System in China and One's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (Excerpt of Additive Regression Models)

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
CCP_Disapproval	0.072***	0.074**	0.157***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Constant	0.652**	1.185***	0.108
	(0.284)	(0.286)	(0.328)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.584	0.615	0.549
Adjusted R^2	0.569	0.600	0.532
Residual Std. Error (df = 404)	0.777	0.779	0.805
F Statistic (df = 15; 404)	37.862***	42.961***	32.732***

Note: Controlled for all other co-variates   *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Also, it is worth noting that the relationship between one's political attitudes and one's sensitivity towards state censorship remains the same if the liberal political ideology measurement is replaced by the single survey question evaluating whether the respondent opposes the current political system controlled by CCP. Since the loss of explanatory power is trivial, the result echos with the idea that the approval or disapproval of the CCP lies in the center of political ideology measurement in China.

Finally, respondents' judgements on media bias and the perceived censorship likelihood of the information is positively correlated. This suggests that respondents may regard

biased information, or information with stronger opinions, as more likely to be censored in general. This also speaks to why citizens in China will conduct self-censoring when posting opinions online: they well understand that strong opinions are likely to be watched by the government.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data comes from two sources: the qualitative responses collected from the online survey experiments and the qualitative interviews conducted on the university campus in the United States. The main questions I address by looking into the qualitative data in this section are the following: whether censorship likelihood plays a role in determining the credibility of rumors online, why *Xinhua News* is more credible than foreign news even when people understand the existence of government censorship, why no treatment results are found in two out of the three experimental groups, and how people understand and react to government censorship.

Sample Characteristics

The qualitative responses collected from the online survey experiments share the same demographics with the quantitative data, while the effective response rate for those free response questions are about 50% for each experimental group. I count all meaningful responses, regardless of their length, as effective responses to the free response questions in the survey experiment. The qualitative interviews consist of 15 respondents, who are sampled by a snow ball sampling, on the campus of University of Michigan—Ann Arbor. The interview samples have both undergraduate and graduate students. The length of their living in mainland China ranges from 7.5 years to 20 years. To eliminate extreme cases, all

interview samples are drawn without political science majors, which presumably gives better training to the students in how to understand the Chinese political situations.

Admittedly, the following discussion using qualitative results are with limited external validity when making causal claims and related analysis because both samples are not nationally representative. However, the results should still be viewed as informative because it illustrates certain social contexts in which the statistical results could be understood, and provides plausible explanations to the pattern of data observed in survey experiments.

The Role of Censorship Likelihood

In the survey experiment, I find that media credibility increased as the censorship likelihood is perceived as higher. However, two questions remain unanswered: why an unbalanced statistical variation of data is witnessed in Figure 1 across experimental groups, and whether the interaction effect is invariant across different social groups. In order to investigate into these questions, I ask respondents when would they believe in rumors containing sensitive information regarding the spread of coronavirus in China and why. I also designed several questions to assess how likely the respondents will pay attention to information related to politics online.

In summary, the qualitative interviews largely support the hypothesis that people will believe more in the information online if they regard them as more likely to be censored. However, instead of being generic, the respondents can be broken down into two groups: those who are interested in politics and those who are not. Respondents who regularly read political news online showed a clearer inclination towards the claim when compared to respondents who mainly looked up entertainment and sports news online. When asked whether

she believed in rumors containing some sensitive clues suggesting government wrongdoings during the recent coronavirus crisis, a respondent said in the interview: "Although maybe not an absolute yes, but I think it's the case most of the time. Or at least it arouses my interests into the case [...] I think the government has faults [...] After all, they should have controlled the Red Cross Association in Wuhan better." Another interviewer gave an example of the online discussion of how the bureaucratic system and why local officials have motivation to cover up the crisis at beginning: "I know it (the discussion) won't be preserved for long [...], but the facts and analysis seem reasonable to me, precisely because it talks about some inner incidents that are sensitive [...] I may keep silent in public, but if you ask me whether I believe it, I may say so. " Her emphasis on real details is similar to the findings where personal anecdotes can increase media credibility. Yet, an important characteristics of those "detailed internal informaion" is that they are subject to potential state censorship.[50]

The main reason why people regard such "inner" or "sensitive" information as in part credible is that they believe the government will cover up the materials endangering its legitimacy. Therefore, the judgement is based on their knowledge that the censorship exists in China. These facts, when laid out in a detailed or convincing fashion, can swing the credibility of the information. For instance, several respondents mention in the interviews that if these politically sensitive clues contain figures or videos, then they will have even more confidence in the information.

Consequently, a potential explanation to the variation seen in the experimental data is the as follows. While the interactive treatment effect is not the same across different

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50. Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control."

groups, the impact of politically sensitive information depends on the respondent's type. Respondents who are more interested in politics have a larger chance to rate the censorship likelihood of the information as higher and believe in the information. Respondents who are less interested in politics, on the other hand, may rate the censorship likelihood and the credibility of the information variously.

Yet, two things are noteworthy. On one hand, most respondents, when expressing their inclination to believe in those politically sensitive clues, also express a potential to reserve their idea in making a definite judgement on the credibility of the information. On the other hand, people who take a clear position on this question and express confidence in their understanding about how censorship in China works make up only a third of all respondents. These two characteristics resonates with the later analysis on why no treatment effects are seen in two out of the three experimental groups and will help us to understand what happens when media credibility decreases in general.

The Party Media as an Authority

The second question I'd like to examine with the qualitative data is why respondents express a trust in the party media over foreign news outlets. To better understand this direct treatment effect found in the experiment, I ask interviewees on their media consumption behaviors, their impressions of foreign news agencies, and their perception of the party media outlets. The answer to this question is not trivial. In fact, different groups of people may well give the same judgement based on completely different reasons. In general, I identified three types of reasons: ignorance, inability, and appreciation.

Ignorance is referring to those who are not interested in politics and don't understand the severity of government censorship. Some typical free responses given in the survey experiment data of this type are: "China enjoys freedom of speech even though we are monitored by the government" or "I feel safe to retweet the article because the government only censor rumors and not facts." These qualitative answers are generally associated with a low score on censorship knowledge and a low score on political knowledge. The low scores reflect a limited, if not incorrect, understanding of the government censorship in China. Therefore, it is possible that these respondents trust the domestic media simply because they don't know much about the censorship and really believe the party news agency is telling the truth.

The same pattern can be seen from the qualitative interviews as well. When a respondent who only use social media to browse entertainment news is asked whether she feel safe to spread information criticizing the government during the Hong Kong protest, she replied:"I usually don't care about this [...] will they really arrest people who spread this information? [...] I think I will only look for domestic media when it comes to news in China as they are reliable." Since she only lived in China for the first eleven years in her life, it's understandable that she has a limited understanding of government censorship in China. It is possible that the ignorance effect is larger for Chinese citizens who live abroad because they are exposed to more of the "anti-China" news reported by foreign news media. Then, if they are ignorant of the government censorship, they will regard the state-sponsored news from China as more trustworthy when compared to the "fake news" of the foreign media outlets.

The second reason for people to trust the official media is their inability to really check the facts. When people are asked about whether they trust the statistics published by the Chinese government on the recent coronavirus, some of them would give a definite no and argue that they government must have covered up the numbers just as it did during the SARS. However, when asked whether they will give numbers published by foreign news media more credits, they also hesitated to do so. "I think the models developed by the foreign media are even worse [...] I'd rather believe more in the official data, although I think they must be lower than the reality [...] either way, there is no means for me to check the reality. So, I'd rather believe the actual figures instead of predictions given by the models," said a respondent during the interviews. This is a reasoning closely related to the general distrust in all media: if I can't find a completely plausible alternative source and am unable to prove or disprove the information, I'd rather trust the official media.

The inability to find alternative sources is also related to an impression that all media are biased. A typical answer given by the respondents when asked whether they trust the foreign media on reporting China is "all media are biased as long as they are expressing opinions. I'd rather trust neither foreign or domestic news, but if I have to pick one, then I will pick *Xinhua*." There is a tendency for respondents to equalize criticism against China and the typical foreign media bias. The reasoning goes as follows: the news is biased as long as it contains certain opinions, and since you must express some opinions when being critical about China, then the news is biased. This reinforces the argument that the strategic censorship in China is effective in terms of preventing citizens from continuously believing in an alternative source in the first place.

Finally, there are people who give the official media credits because they think the party media outlets are getting better, despite the persistence of censorship. "The government is getting more transparent over time" is a typical response given in the survey experiments of this type. A respondent expressed the similar idea when talking about the coronavirus during the interviews as well:"I think the situation is at least better than what happens during SARS [...] I will give the media credit and trust it more."

Indifference, Self-Censorship and Credibility

Then, what contributes to the lack of treatment effects in two out of the three treatment groups even if censorship likelihood is always positively associated with media credibility? To answer this question, I asked respondents when they would have a strong opinion on information credibility and when would they feel comfortable to express such opinion in public. Those questions are asked both in specific context, the Hong Kong protest and the coronavirus crisis, and in the generic sense.

Two potential explanations drawn from the interviews are the lack of firm opinions and the unwillingness to express firm opinions. On one hand, the lack of firm opinion indicates that citizens, especially those who are not interested in politics, are unwilling to make a precise judgement on the credibility of the information. In fact, most of the respondents who are not interested in politics won't consciously think of credibility when they see a rumor online. Most of them would simply perceive the information as "an interesting case" and move on. "What has that to do with me" or "I don't care" are typical reactions when politically uninterested respondents are asked whether they trust or want to spread the information.

During the interviews, several respondents said they usually take the criticism against the government online as stories and won't bother to check the credibility of those stories since they are not interested in the event. An implication of this attitude is that people don't care about the truth when they don't care about the political events related to those information. When asked whether he will do a fact check on criticisms of government online, a respondent said in the interview:"I will not waste my time [...] I don't have connections with the government and whoever was corrupt or not has nothing to do with me." Therefore, the difference in credibility may be too small to precisely measure for information that only differs in details.

On the other hand, the unwillingness to express firm opinions can be understood as a consequence of self-censorship. That is, even when respondents do have an opinion on the credibility of different information, they are unwilling to reveal their judgement publicly. The decision to self-censor can be attributed to both political and psychological reasons. The political motivation to self-censor is usually the fear of state repression. In the qualitative responses collected for the two experimental groups on government criticism and collective action, the respondents tend to comment "No talking about the national affairs", especially when they expressed a neutral position (a score of precisely 4 out of 7) on the discussion of credibility. Most citizens in China share the consensus that they should take no firm stand on politically sensitive issues, at least in public discussions, to be safe. Therefore, when people think assigning credibility to a piece of information is expressing support to the criticism at least in part, it's not hard to understand why they tend not to make the judgements.

Besides this kind of self-censorship motivated by potential state repressions, self-censorship can also be a consequence of social desirability bias. Some respondents com-

mented that they don't evaluate the credibility of the information because they think it will cause conflicts between people with different views. "If a friend of mine doesn't trust the information while I do, then our friendship will be in danger. I won't express the idea or make the judgements until I'm sure most people agree with me on the issue. I don't want to waste my time arguing with others." said an undergrad during an interview. This suggests that the lack of treatment effect could be a direct result of social desirability bias among survey respondents. Both explanations related to self-censorship, even though the underlying mechanisms are completely different, can be supported by the fact that self-censorship variable is found significant on credibility for the experimental groups other than the alternation of sources.

Finally, the interviews provide an insight into the social contexts in which we can better interpret the statistical data. For instance, although most interviewees said they felt uncomfortable publicly expressing their opinions, they did confirm their willingness to discuss in a private setting: such as in a group chat containing only family members and friends. Since WeChat is a social media platform where you receive most of the information from your contacts and not strangers, private discussions may happen more then the survey experiment could possibly simulate. Also, when a piece of information is spread by one's family member or close friend, the reputation of the person can back up the credibility of the information, which is also not captured by the survey experiment. Consequently, the quantitative results should be understood in a public discussion context and admittedly doesn't capture all the activities happened on WeChat.

Another conclusion about the social context in which the statistical results should be understood is regarding the reason to self-censor. While the qualitative responses collected

from the survey data overwhelmingly mention the fear of being caught by the internet police in China, interviewees in the United States express more caution in avoiding conflicts in online discussions. Consequently, different media environments could provide different motivations to self-censor: students who study abroad may care less about the state repression because they are far from mainland, but may pay more attention to potential conflicts with their nationalist friends.

<div align="center">Conditional Acquiescence to the Government Censorship</div>

The final observation I make out of the qualitative data is how people understand censorship in general. It's surprising that all respondents firmly state that they think censorship is justifiable under certain conditions during the interviews, although they differ in the level of understanding, in the level of interest, and in the level of pro-liberal ideologies. The typical justification given to the government censorship are of two kinds: prevention of rumors and the maintenance of stability. The respondents all agree on the statement that the government is obligated to remove rumors online, so that there is someone who can ensure the information online is correct. Nevertheless, they admit that the facts, especially the politically sensitive facts examined by this study, are only known to the government. Also, the respondents all express an appreciation of social stability. A typical argument given would be that due to the large size of population in China, a provocative information online can easily cause social unrest and thus the government should use censorship to prevent catastrophes. A radical respondent who supports this view even gives the following defense of the government censorship:"The ordinary citizens should not have access to all the facts. The government should decide what citizens need to know so that the citizens

won't prevent the government from solving the problem [...] I don't care whether the figure of people infected (by the coronavirus) published by the government is censored or not. I only care whether we can contain the infection, which is the true problem. We should be pragmatic." Interestingly, these two reasons are also the most frequently used reasons for the authoritarian regimes to defend their conduction of censorship.

A potential explanation for this phenomena is that all interview samples are drawn from students with high social economic status. Since students, especially undergraduate students, studying in the United States are more likely to come from wealthy families, they could potentially have more interest in the current system. Thus, they are less likely to be in favor of radical actions against the system and more likely to trump social stability. This social context complicates the picture of assessing media credibility in China: Educated citizens, especially those with high social economic status, would tolerate censorship in the pursuit of social stability. Then, whether the information is truly credible would be of secondary importance, if it matters at all, as credibility is not the first criteria for a piece of information to be supported, circulated and thus survive online.

Another potential explanation is the difference in how people understand the concept of "freedom of speech." Similar to the debate of whether hate speech and political adver-tisement should be considered a part of the "full freedom of speech" in the United States, the rise of political polarization and misinformation online could have created a different expectation and understanding of "freedom of speech" among Chinese citizens. As Chinese citizens share a consensus over the importance of stability, they could well agree on the government standing that freedom of speech should not endanger social stability. Such an understanding can be summarized by a sentence from the recent party propaganda: "The

internet is not beyond the law." (互联网不是法外之地) This naturally sets a boundary to the freedom of speech and prohibits citizens from discussing sensitive political issues, even when they think the freedom of speech is actually protected.

Other Results from the Pilot Survey Experiments

Throughout the two waves of the pilot survey experiments, several modifications were made on the experimental materials and the survey questions. There are three important results at the early stages, which are not reflected by the current data. These results include the measurement of self-censorship and bias, the elimination of commonly seen rumors, and the trivialization of sensitive clues.

The measurement of self-censorship and bias is added after the second wave of the pilot experiments because the qualitative responses suggest the influences of them. It is possible that people will systematically discredit the sensitive information due to self-censorship. Then, it is proven that both variables played an important role in understanding the media credibility of rumors online, as suggested by the current results.

The revisions to make self-censorship the treatments more "subtle" in all experimental materials are due to the qualitative interviews conducted during the pilot experimental stages. Usually, political communication studies require the cues to be strong and salient in order to get an observable treatment effect. However, this may be counter-productive for the study on censorship since no one would write explicitly against government on social media in China. Thus, the materials are not "real enough" to trigger people's responses in the sense that they will hardly appear in real life. This also helps explain the small magnitude of the identifiable treatment effects: you can't have salient cues on political sensitivity in

an experiment conducted in authoritarian regime if you would prefer the data to reflect the actual situation.

Finally, the past experiences of people's exposure to rumors are proven to have an impact on how citizens view the rumors online today. The free responses collected for the first wave of the pilot experiments points to the possibility that people systematically doubt the information involving speculation on government corruption because the government official mentioned is Jiang Zemin, the former general party secretary of CCP. They claim that *The Epoch Times* (大纪元时报), a Chinese newspaper run by Falun Gong spiritual movement in the U.S., always uses the same narrative to discredit the Chinese government. Namely, any government corruption is finally related to Jiang Zemin and he is responsible, directly or indirectly, for most of the scandals in China. As Falun Gong is defined as cult by the party propaganda, the citizens don't believe their words at all. Such experiences largely discredit all rumors related to the government criticisms where Jiang Zemin is the central figure. This suggests an interesting perspective remains unexplored by this paper: how stereotypes created by propaganda and censorship discredit information, even when it might be true, in authoritarian regimes.

A critical implication of these results is the use of qualitative data to frame better survey questions when conducting research in authoritarian regimes. The qualitative interviews can help us to understand whether the theories developed under the democratic settings can be directly applied to the research in authoritarian regimes. For instance, the inclusion of specific descriptions may have opposite effects in different types of regimes as suggested above. Also, the qualitative interviews help identify previously neglected co-variates in the survey experiment, self-censorship, for example.

Implications of the Research

The results I find in this paper have several implications, both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, the research illustrates mixed effects of government censorship on media credibility. The fact that the Chinese citizens give more credit to the party media on average has a profound implication because it largely consolidates the governance of the authoritarian regime through the communication tool. Also, the recent outbreak of the government's reporting a doctor in China, who is the whistleblower of the coronavirus and died due to the coronavirus, as spreading the rumor online has triggered a round of criticism on the state-owned news media. Since the experiments were in the field before this outbreak, it would be interesting to see how this incident could change the public opinion. If the pattern observed by this paper holds for a replication, then the effectiveness of government censorship and propaganda will be proven to be stronger than we have previously believed.

Theoretically, the research laid a foundation to understand how political characteristics associated with or fostered by government censorship can affect people's judgement of media credibility. On one hand, the main results of the paper contribute to a neglected side of the studies on government censorship: whether censorship can have negative effects on the government even if it serves their ends. Following the research of Roberts (2018), which shows the possibility that government censorship may increase citizens' access to undesirable information, this paper illustrates the potential for government censorship to induce trust in political rumors among certain groups of citizens in China.[51] The variation of potential effects among different groups of citizens based on their social and political characteristics

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51. Roberts, *Censored: distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall*.

also corresponds with the analysis framework proposed by Geddes and other authors.[52] This suggests that even though the government censorship could have negative effects, the magnitude of the effects may not be ubiquitous across the population. It could strengthen the support of national narration in favor of CCP among citizens with less knowledge concerning censorship, while give more credits to political rumors among citizens who are familiar with government censorship. Therefore, this may lead to an increased polarization in China around the main political cleavage, which is to support or oppose the CCP ruling.

On the other hand, the research fits into a larger discussion in the field of political communication. Since we are entering an age of general media distrust and polarization, this could have a profound theoretical implication on investigating how the government can use "fake news" as a political weapon. In democracies, fake news labels are usually based on partisanship and are used by right-wing populist leaders to attack their domestic political opponents. The research suggests a possibility that the authoritarian regimes can use similar strategies to attack foreign news with different ideologies. By establishing the party media as the ultimate authority concerning controversial or polarized political issues, the Chinese government can successfully control mainstream public opinion online. This implication is supported by a Bayesian factor analysis analyzing how the three dimensions—source, message and medium—are contributing to the overall media credibility of the controlled version information in all three experimental groups. As illustrated by Table 6, the factor loading for the source credibility is the largest among three dimensions for all experimental groups when it comes to the measurement on controlled version information. In fact, the

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52. Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (1989): 319–347, https://doi.org/10.2307/2111150.

loading of source credibility is always significantly larger than that of message credibility, which is the second important factor. Consequently, the presence of *Xinhua News*, the official party media, as the source of information largely alternates respondents' impression on the media credibility and plays a major role in persuading readers. This suggests that the official media outlets in authoritarian regimes may also be more credible as compared to private ones, which is similar to the credibility enjoyed by public broadcast in democracies.

	λ	Ψ_{jj}
Medium Credibility (Experimental Group: Source)	-0.537 (0.07)	0.72 (0.08)
Source Credibility (Experimental Group: Source)	-0.973 (0.07)	0.06 (0.08)
Message Credibility (Experimental Group: Source)	-0.719 (0.07)	0.49 (0.07)
Medium Credibility (Experimental Group: Government Criticism)	-0.586 (0.07)	0.67 (0.07)
Source Credibility (Experimental Group: Government Criticism)	-0.978 (0.07)	0.07 (0.08)
Message Credibility (Experimental Group: Government Criticism)	-0.607 (0.07)	0.64 (0.07)
Medium Credibility (Experimental Group: Collective Action)	-0.508 (0.07)	0.75 (0.08)
Source Credibility (Experimental Group: Collective Action)	-0.929 (0.08)	0.15 (0.11)
Message Credibility (Experimental Group: Collective Action)	-0.764 (0.07)	0.42 (0.09)

Note: Entries without parentheses are posterior means and entries with parentheses are posterior standard deviations. The column labeled λ provides information about what can be thought of as the factor loadings or the item discrimination parameters; and the column labeled Ψ_{jj} provides information regarding the error variances. The chain was run for 10,000 scans after 1,000 burn-in scans. The acceptance rate was normal.

Table 6: Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Controlled Version)

Nevertheless, even though a similar distinction between the credibility of public and private media sources is found across different types of regimes, it is hard to determine whether the distinction is caused by the same reason. In democracies, public broadcast gain more credibility in providing detailed and unbiased political information.[53] Therefore, citizens are better informed when they watch public broadcast and can in turn trust the media source. As suggested by Table 6, message credibility matters most for respondents in judging media credibility when the information is coming from news media located in Singapore. As the news on China is less likely to be censored by the Singapore government, it could provide more detailed and objective political information. This provides a parallel, even though it's not perfect, to the story of public broadcast in established democracies. In autocracies, on the contrary, the official media outlets tend to provide less detailed and more biased information due to government censorship. Consequently, the underlying mechanism which leads to a high credibility of official media in authoritarian regimes should be understood differently from the story in democracies.

	λ	Ψ_{jj}
Medium Credibility	0.420	0.83
(Experimental Group: Source)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Source Credibility	0.847	0.29
(Experimental Group: Source)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Message Credibility	0.972	0.06
(Experimental Group: Source)	(0.07)	(0.08)

Note: This is the summary for the treated version information within the source experimental group. The results are different for the other two experimental groups. In summary, the source credibility remains the leading factor for the other two experimental groups in a significant way.

Table 7: Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Treated Version)

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53. Soroka et al., "Auntie Knows Best?"

Admittedly, the interactive regression models in Table 4 explains less variance in the data compared to the additive regression models controlling for demographics and other political characteristics of the respondents. Therefore, it is clear that the political characteristics measured in the model are more likely to work as a whole instead of working independently. In fact, the variables are theoretically interrelated to instead of independent from each other. For instance, the respondents who prefer liberal political ideology are more likely to distrust the government and equip themselves with more sophisticated knowledge concerning the government censorship. Then, a natural objection to raise is that endogenous effects may exist in the analysis models. I will fully accept this objection since it would be hard to eliminate such influences and establish a single, completely independent causal inference path. Both the interactive regression model and the mediation model can not solve the problem. Furthermore, the main focus of this study is not to argue that censorship likelihood is the single prominent variable contributing to the credibility of political rumors in China. Instead, I'd like to prove that it's one of the potential contributors and thus a better understanding of censorship effects can be constructed.

Future research may try to solve the following questions. First of all, it might be possible to construct a different experimental setting, which allows us to test whether the causal relationships exist for the mere association I find between certain variables and the censorship likelihood of the information. If causal relationships could be tested, then we will be able to understand how people learn the mechanism of government censorship from their daily experiences. Furthermore, this paper suggests that the degree of sophistication towards general political knowledge is different from the degree of sophistication towards government censorship in China. Future research could investigate whether this difference

is decisive and has implications for the political control in authoritarian regimes by blocking citizens from obtaining certain knowledge through higher education. Finally, people in China think government censorship is justifiable under circumstances and the explanations given are similar to the ones used by the government. This phenomenon may have implications for understanding what constitutes legitimacy in authoritarian regimes: it is possible that the citizens in some authoritarian regimes are willing to compromise some basic rights, such as the freedom of speech, in evaluating the legitimacy of the incumbent in exchange for political stability and economic growth.

Conclusion

This paper examines the influences of government censorship on the credibility of online political rumors in China. I find a mixed result throughout the project, suggesting both the effectiveness and harms of the government censorship. Government censorship helps to cultivate a nationalism on social media in favor of Beijing. Any narrative criticizing Beijing will not be trusted due to the political partisanship developed online, and the government can easily control the public discourse by appealing to nationalism. However, censorship can also be counter productive as the primary hypothesis of this paper holds: citizens are more likely to believe political rumors which they perceive as more likely to be censored, which are usually politically sensitive and anti-government.

Besides, the secondary hypotheses on what affects people's judgement on censorship likelihood are generally proved. Although no causal inferences could be made, the mere associations are found to be significant. People's understanding of what contents will be classified as sensitive and subject to censorship is positively related to their knowledge on

government censorship. Thus, people with more sophisticated knowledge concerning censorship are more likely to identify any piece of sensitive information as subject to censorship. However, simultaneously, the possession of general knowledge concerning politics seems to be irrelevant. Also, given any piece of politically sensitive information, people who have a stronger perception that the government perception exists are more likely to identify any piece of sensitive information as subject to censorship.

Furthermore, the data also suggests that strategic censorship in China can be effective in three aspects. First of all, it prevents people from developing a systematic understanding of what contents are more likely to be censored than others, and thus prevents people from strategically avoiding government censorship as the treatment has no direct effect on the judgment of censorship likelihood. Furthermore, it encourages self-censorship, as suggested by the qualitative data, among citizens. Citizens are either not interested in political events, and thus will not try to hold government accountable, or will doubt any information that doesn't follow the norm of self-censorship and explicitly criticize the government. As suggested in the previous section, future research may try to prove or disprove the causal relationship behind these associations.

Finally, this paper makes several comparisons between the political communication in democracies and in autocracies. Even though they may share similar empirical outcomes, such as a higher trust in the state or public funded media outlets, the mechanisms behind could be largely different. Besides, the actual content of partisanship in discussing political communication can vary across countries because the core values of the political ideology debates are varied. While political partisanship is more about liberal or conservative in the United States, it's more about pro or anti the CCP in China.

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