

Attacking with Their Own Words: The Use of Censored Sources by the Party Media in China
(Research Design)

Ziyi Wu
PhD Student
Department of Political Science
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

January 20th, 2021

Prepared for the APSA 2021 Annual Conference

The author wishes to acknowledge any peers who read and provided feedback on the draft design.

Abstract

There exists a seemingly contradictory treatment towards foreign news and social media in China. On the one hand, foreign news articles and social media are severely censored. On the other, the Communist Party frequently quotes these censored sources when addressing the public. These behaviors are puzzling. It is natural for authoritarian regimes to hide repressive behaviors, rather than to expose them. The use of foreign news contents is also not necessary for advancing party ideologies because the party's own words work just as well. To address the puzzle, I ask the following research questions: Why does the party media in China actively quote censored sources when reporting contested foreign affairs? How do Chinese citizens react to their government's simultaneous censorship and citation of foreign news sources? I argue that the party media quote from foreign sources to demonstrate professionalism and to appear credible, while government censorship has effectively framed foreign news sources as generally biased and thus prevents people from trusting them in the first place.

Keywords: China, government propaganda, government censorship, authoritarianism, political communication

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes use propaganda and censorship simultaneously to exercise control over public opinion. Although seemingly simple, the actual use of propaganda and censorship by autocrats is more complicated than we recognize. For instance, there exists a seemingly contradicting treatment towards foreign news and social media in China. On one hand, foreign news articles are severely censored in China and social media like Twitter or Facebook are completely banned from using. On the other hand, the party media frequently quote those censored sources when addressing the public and commenting on foreign issues. This quoting behavior could potentially endanger the legitimacy of the government by exposing citizens to censored news sources, reminding them the existence of government censorship, and motivating them to verify the information. Nevertheless, the Chinese government continues to practice such a paradox. With a rising tension between the United States and China, the party media even displays a larger interest in quoting foreign news agencies when attacking President Trump on how his administration deals with the covid and on how the President conceals his tax returns. Even more puzzling, the party media would actively state how Chinese diplomats attacks the U.S. policies on Twitter, for which ordinary citizens are not supposed to hold an account.

To discover the mechanism underlying the puzzle stated above, this paper raises the following research question: Why does party media in China actively quoting censored sources when reporting contested foreign affairs? Furthermore, I will also investigate why citizens are not motivated to criticize the government for censoring foreign news and social media even if the party itself is actively quoting from them.

The traditional theories on government propaganda fail short of explaining the paradox. The manipulation theory alone is not enough to explain the phenomenon because the information

from foreign media outlets is not necessary to form public opinion in favor of the autocrat. If only the information content matters, then there is no reason to take the risk of exposing citizens to the censored media. The signaling theory would even suggest the reverse: if the main purpose of the party propaganda is to demonstrate its control over the public discourse within the state, then they should always prefer party discourse over other sources of information to show dominance. Consequently, instead of viewing government propaganda and censorship as separate mechanisms working independently, this paper argues that they work together as a dynamic system and thus complement each other in shaping a favorable political narrative for the autocrat.

Based on the literature in media credibility and political behavior, I propose that the party media actively cite foreign news sources, as well as comments on foreign social media, to appear neutral on highly contested issues. Simultaneously, the government censorship creates a discrepancy between people's attitudes towards the foreign media outlets on specific issues and in general. The general distrust in foreign media fostered by the government censorship alleviates the risk of citizens searching for alternative information, while the consent to specific issues guarantees the effectiveness of propaganda.

To advance the discussion, this paper is organized in the following way. First, I will lay out the theory and hypothesis of this paper. Then, a short literature review will be provided to situate the research question. The discussion of methodology and implications will follow.

Theory and Hypothesis

As suggested in the introduction, the theory of this paper can be broken down into two parts, with the first half explaining why the party media is quoting from censored sources, and the second half explaining why there only exists minimal risks for the government.

I argue that the party media quote from foreign sources to demonstrate professionalism and to appear neutral. The literature in media credibility has found that citizens are more likely to trust a piece of information when people regard the information as professional, informative and unbiased (Metzger et al. 2003; Appelman and Sundar 2016; Lucassen and Schraagen 2012). In fact, the Chinese government has a long tradition of selectively paraphrasing foreign news to foster party propaganda (Rudolph 1984), and separately reporting foreign and domestic responses to public emergencies (Jin Li, Brewer, and Ley 2017). However, even though the party outlets are obligated to advance party ideologies, the media framing of trans-edited international news seems largely factual (Kuang and Wang 2020; Kuang and Wei 2018). This factual framing of the information, I argue, serves to cultivate a sense of professionalism and objectivity, which increases the credibility of the party's stand on the issue.

Also, this supposed factual framing tactic is in sharp contrast to the way party directly attacks liberal democracies in *Xinwen Lianbo*, China's flagship news program, in party's own voice (Zhang and Boukes 2019). The mitigated tone could also serve to strengthen media credibility since the sense of goodwill could arouse citizens' affective responses and thus increase the media credibility (McCroskey and Teven 1999). Therefore, the first half of the theory is mainly derived from the media credibility literature and argues that main reason for official media in China to quote from censored sources is to increase credibility.

The argument on increased credibility help to situate the latter half of my theory as well: why can the Chinese government prevent citizens from trusting the censored sources when it is quoting censored sources for its own credibility? I theorized that government censorship has shaped foreign news sources as generally biased and thus prevents people from trusting them in the first place, which removes the danger of people protesting against government censorship

due to the quotes. This follows the literature in political behavior stating that people can shift their attitudes towards concrete political issues (Converse 2006; Donald 2003; Hochschild 1981), while remains largely stable on perception of general values and principles (Feldman 2003). If this notion of inconsistency between one's set of political beliefs and one's opinion of individual events was to apply to the puzzle described at the beginning of this paper, we may arrive at the theory proposed here. While citizens hold a general belief that the foreign sources are biased against China, and thus untrustworthy, their evaluation of foreign sources on a specific issue reported by the state media is not necessarily bounded by that belief system. For instance, the Washington Post is biased, but is faithful about Trump's tax evasion. The proposed theory is powerful in two ways. On one hand, it explains a seemingly contradiction with a coherent logic. On the other hand, it bridges the discussion of public opinions in democracies with the discussion of public opinions framed by government propaganda under autocracies.

Complement to the behavioral argument, I also theorize that the strategic censorship adopted by the Chinese government helps to reduce the cognitive dissonance of citizens when encountering censored sources in government propaganda. By strategic censorship, I'm referring to the deliberately created ambiguity around off-limit topics and off-limit behaviors by the Chinese Communist Party (Roberts 2018). For instance, although the use of VPN is unlawful and there exist individual cases where citizens are imprisoned due to VPN usages, most of the population using VPN to access foreign social media are tolerated by the surveillance organizations. Consequently, the censored sources are not "isolated" from citizens lives as traditional literature assumes. Then, a decreased level of cognitive dissonance is less likely to induce active behaviors such as fact checking or searching for alternative information. More importantly, as stated in the first half the theory, the factual framing around these issues suggests

that the fact checking can only confirm and strengthen the party's argument in most cases. And, the access to polarized foreign social media, would also in turn exacerbates citizens' perceptions that foreign media is biased and untrustworthy in general, as suggested above.

Together, this theory proposed is trying to connect two separated areas of study in today's political communication literature: censorship and propaganda. I argue that since they are both tools for autocrats to manage public grievances in open discussions, the two mechanisms are in fact interdependent and interrelated. Thus, we should study them as a whole instead of treating them separately.

Research Design and Methodology

This research adopts a mix-methodology research design consisting of an automated text-analysis, two-by-two online survey experiments, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The three components will sever distinct, yet interrelated functions. First of all, the text-analysis of media content will provide the foundation of our analysis and show the existence of the paradox stated: the party media in China do frequently quote from censored sources when reporting on foreign issues. Then, the two-by-two online survey experiments uncover the main causal inferences made by my hypotheses: citizens view information containing quotes from censored sources as more objective, professional, and thus credible, while the grievance originated from government censorship does not increase due to the presence of censored sources in party media. Finally, the semi-structured interviews are designed to strengthen the causal claims made from the experimental data, rule out some potential objections related to reverse causal mechanisms and understand the psychological motivations of respondent's political attitudes and behaviors.

Text-Analysis

The main goal of the automated text-analysis is to validate the universality of the phenomenon of quoting from censored sources by party-affiliated media in China. By universality, I mean both cross-sectional and panel characteristics: the practice is long-established throughout years and is adopted by all media sectors affiliated with the party, regardless of their bureaucratic nature. The targeted dataset is the social media content published by three WeChat official account in China—Xinhua News, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CCCLY), and the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPAC)—from 2016 to 2020. These three accounts represent the official media outlet, the party organization, and the judicial system respectively.

The data is collected via VReadTech¹ and contains the time of publishment, the title, and the permanent URL of the articles² published by the three official accounts mentioned above. The automated text-analysis will contain three stages. In the first stage, the data will be pre-processed to exclude all articles not mentioning or suggesting a relationship to foreign affairs in the title. Then, a semi-supervised learning will categorize the articles related to foreign affairs into seven categories according to the topics mentioned by the titles: the covid pandemic, foreign elections, foreign economies, territory disputes, global leadership, historical memories and others. Some examples from the official account of the CCCYL for each category are provided below:

Category	Description	Example
The Covid Pandemic	Content related to the covid-19	“9 Million People Will be Provided with The Covid-19 Vaccine Manufactured by China” (下个月将为 900 万人接种中国新冠疫苗, 2020-11-05) ³

¹ <https://www.vreadtech.com/>

² The original data is in simplified Chinese.

³ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655336953&idx=3&sn=2835ee2ab1ac95522b75322512df55af&chksm=84c5d4c0b3b25dd6bbad425c0f1d33c49cbe1fae23bf33af0e9f53f87ceace299a55266e647d#rd

Foreign Elections	Content related to elections outside mainland China (e.g. the US presidential election, the Hong Kong election, the Taiwan election, etc.)	“The Election Observers from the OSCE said that the US election is ‘tarnished’” (欧安组织观察员：美国选举被“玷污”了, 2020-11-06) ⁴
Foreign Economies	Content related to the economic performance of foreign countries	“The Sino-US Trade War Escalated. Internet Users Commented: ‘Fight harder! Strive to Get a 30-year Peace in Economy!’” (中美贸易战升级！网友说“狠狠打！打出30年经济和平！”, 2018-04-05) ⁵
Territory Disputes	Content related to the status of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South China Sea	“The US Calls for Taiwan to Attend the Meeting? The Member States of the WHO said No!” (美国呼吁让台湾参会？世卫组织成员国：拒绝！, 2020-11-10) ⁶
Global Leadership	Content related to the expansion of China’s global influence	“Sweden Suddenly Attacks Huawei and ZTE, and It’s Not Simple” (瑞典突然对华为中兴下黑手，背后很简单..., 2020-11-06) ⁷
Historical Memories	Content related to the collective memory of defending China against Western invasions	“Whoever Comes, We Will Fight!” (不管啥样的敌人来，咱都敢打！, 2020-11-04) ⁸
Others	Any other content	“The US Established the 1776 Commission to Advance Patriotic Education” (美国成立“1776委员会”，目标：促进“爱国主义教育”，2020-11-04) ⁹

Table 1. Illustration of Categories of Different Topics

⁴ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655337252&idx=2&sn=5151525963e313dae8669d4df4dc49fe&chksm=84c5d61db3b25f0bc22b04f4b02383d5004351846ebf5de3fffb58f4b54ba1868bbc884037c1#rd

⁵ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2654999622&idx=1&sn=38ebe5ef8d249fa24b7a44ae03590e43&chksm=

⁶ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655343147&idx=2&sn=d5ee6b0a3ffe0fb7df9e37a532ddb47&chksm=84c5bf12b3b236042deb89fa169a5841dc782ab77e605b2e07a59b759cc5abdb74380bb226cd#rd

⁷ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655337840&idx=3&sn=82426831c4f0103902a1c36f703b8a09&chksm=84c5d049b3b2595fbc5d8b91287b713d0eb112d475ba4a1d5b9dcd5329912cbf1539e618ebdf#rd

⁸ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655335271&idx=3&sn=ff7350d5f8db57e07f8beb1fc95faa7a&chksm=84c5de5eb3b257480ace00e3e42055e40c4cf11d12d2f6872c86f0d428903182ede64b1b76e7#rd

⁹ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655335079&idx=3&sn=afd764a80518a50375216123c53be5d3&chksm=84c5df9eb3b256881a57b7aad028d2b22f1805381c6d49796ccc35aab0b188d9960f6742740d#rd

In the second stage, articles within each category will be classified into one of the four types through a feedforward neural network: containing screenshots of censored sources, mentioning foreign news sources in text, mentioning foreign social media in text, others. A feedforward neural network enables us to avoid double classifications. For example, if an article containing a screenshot of The Washington Post also mention the source in text, it will be classified as an article containing screenshots of censored sources but not an article mentioning foreign news sources in text because it already meets the first level criterion. This classification helps us to understand the frequency of quoting from censored sources on different topics and the proportion of those quotes accompanying by screenshots. If the hypothesis of quoting for objectivity and professionalism holds, the proportion of quotes accompanying by screenshots should be considerable because screenshots serve to prove the authenticity of those quotes. Also, given China's claim that it should assume responsibility for global leadership, I expect there to be an increased practice of quoting from foreign sources in the "Global Leadership" category because the party media want to show a universal support of China on the global stage.

In the third stage, the quotes will be compared with the censored sources mentioned in the article. The comparison is to determine whether the framing of the content is factual. By factual, I specifically mean the following two criteria: (1) the content quoted was published abroad within three days of the article's publishing date on WeChat; (2) the content quoted was a truthful paraphrase of a direct translation from the foreign sources. The former criterion is set to ensure that the content is timely to serve as news, and the latter criterion is set to exclude quotes distorting the original meaning and thus are not factual. If the hypothesis of quoting for objectivity and professionalism holds, we should identify most of the quotes as factual according to the criteria stated. However, it is possible that the percentage of factual quotes varies among

different categories: the historical memories category, for example, is more ideological compared to other categories and thus may have a lower share of factual quotes compared to others.

There are two main potential drawbacks of this method. On one hand, there exists a potential of repeated counting in the first stage. For example, the article titled “The US Calls for Taiwan to Attend the Meeting? The Member States of the WHO said No!” can be labeled as the covid pandemic, the territory dispute, and the global leadership simultaneously because the article talks about the status of Taiwan in an international organization when dealing with covid-19 issues. To address this problem, I argue that we should allow each article to be filtered into more than one category because a double counting will not undermine our analysis on the universality of the phenomenon (the proportion of articles quoting from censored sources). On the other hand, there exists the problem of “partial quoting.” The party media quote incompletely to reach a conclusion opposite to what is made by the original source. Theoretically, I argue, such phenomenon only exists on political controversies. Therefore, to address the problem, human coders will be introduced to double check articles categorized as territory disputes to exclude articles only partially quoting the censored sources.

Online Survey Experiment

The two-by-two online survey experiments target Chinese nationals in several countries. I plan to recruit a 1,200-subject nationally representative sample from mainland China, and four groups of 300-subject student samples from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and the United States. The representative sample in mainland China is of major interest and will be used to test the first half of the theory: the information without quotes should be perceived as less credible than information quoting from foreign sources. The four student samples will provide a cross-

national comparison of the results, showing whether Chinese students experiencing different information and political regimes abroad will respond differently. The four cases are carefully chosen to represent the different political environments. Hong Kong represents an environment under the influence of mainland China and is becoming more authoritarian during the past years. Taiwan represents an environment under the influence of mainland China and is rather stable during the past years. Singapore represents an established autocracy without significant influence casted by mainland China. The US represents an established democracy without significant influence casted by mainland China. The experiment will be administrated under complete randomization.

The experiments will contain two treatments: quotes from foreign news sources, and quotes from Twitter users. The quotes contained in the information will be represented by both a summary of the article and a constructed screenshot. The screenshot is always included to provide a salient and clear cue of the treatment, which is expected to trigger clear treatment effects on the information credibility. If the hypothesis holds, we should expect the following: (1) there exists a total treatment effect of increased information credibility between the treated groups and the control; (2) the total treatment effect of information credibility between the treated group III and the control should be greater than those between the treated group I or II and the control; (3) the average measured trustworthiness of the censored sources should not differ among all four experimental groups within each country; (4) the average measured disapproval of government censorship should not differ among all four experimental groups within each country.

	Twitter Comments Absence	Twitter Comments Presence
Foreign News Sources Absence	Control Group	Treated Group II
Foreign News Sources Presence	Treated Group I	Treated Group III

Figure 1. Experimental Design

Also, the survey experiment will gather information on respondents' demographics, political ideology, political knowledge, media consumption habits, general perception of foreign media, and awareness of government censorship. This would rule out two alternative hypotheses: that, on one hand, citizens may be unaware of government censorship even if they see the quotes; and on the other hand, citizens may not perceive the foreign media as biased due to censorship. If my theory holds, then it should follow that people understand Twitter is banned within mainland China. Also, if citizens in mainland China perceive foreign news as biased due to censorship, then foreign respondents will display a higher level of trust in foreign media on average.

There are three potential drawbacks of the experimental design. First of all, as all studies using the experimental method, the external validity of the research is in question. To expand the external validity as much as possible, the study proposes the following on the experimental materials. On one hand, the content will be presented as an article published by the official WeChat account of The Global Times (环球时报). WeChat is chosen as the medium of testing because it's widely used among Chinese nationals both domestic and abroad. Thus, it is a natural representation of the daily news sources possessed by Chinese nationals. Also, the universality of the phenomenon on WeChat is checked by the automated text analysis before. The Global Times is chosen as the source because it's a party affiliated news agency reporting a lot on foreign affairs but doesn't directly appeal to the impression of the Chinese Communist Party in its name. On the other hand, the materials of interest will be constructed based on actual report of the US presidential election published by the CCCLY. The US presidential election is chosen as the

topic because it is important and has gained global attention but is not as sensitive as a topic of the pandemic or the territory dispute. To use an actual content as the prototype of the experimental materials serves to ensure the possibility of the actual spread of the information in reality.

Furthermore, there is a problem is unbalanced sample between the data collected from mainland China and the data collected from abroad. This, however, I argue, is not major concern because the major causal inferences are made within each sample instead of between samples. The comparative analysis could give more leverages to the theory by providing suggestions on how the theory is affected by different political environment, but not in a causal sense. Also, if a primitive causal claim is to be made, a matched-sample analysis can be done to provide such insights.

Finally, the student samples are clearly not representative samples. However, I should defend the choice of a limited sample for at least two reasons. On one hand, a convenient sample is chosen because it is hard to characterize what a full sample of Chinese nationals abroad is since they would consist of Chinese students, workers, and first-generation immigrants. The wide range of identities covered by the label “Chinese nationals” makes it extremely hard to construct a representative sample in practice. On the other hand, the sample chosen is likely to yield a result biasing against the hypothesis. Since the students studying abroad in universities are assumed to have a higher level of education on average compared to a hypothetical representative sample, the student sample should be more resistant to the propaganda techniques compared to the public. Thus, if a treatment effect is found for a student sample, the effect of government propaganda is likely to be even larger if a representative sample were to be constructed. Also, a higher education population is likely to be more sensitive towards the

existence of government censorship. Then, if no differences in the level of censorship disapproval is found between the experimental groups for a highly education sample, the difference is only going to be smaller for a general population. Therefore, the selection bias will not significantly endanger the causal inferences.

Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured qualitative interviews will be conducted in mainland China using a snowball-sampling technique among the adults who frequently consume online news from social media. The snowball-sampling method is preferred due to three reasons. Firstly, the snowball-sampling is comparatively easier to access in an authoritarian regime compared to a nationally representative sample. Although the subject of this project is not considered as forbidden to talk about in mainland China by conventional wisdom, questions regarding the behavior and party media can still be sensitive to respondents and local governments given a tighter control of the media environment in China today. Therefore, an open recruiting of a large and nationally representative sample is not desirable. Secondly, while non-random sampling makes it difficult, if not impossible, to draw causal inference from the qualitative data, the snowball-sampling technique with various seeds across several key dimensions allows a simulation of “as if random” sampling. This “as if random” nature can alleviate, although can’t completely solve, the problem of causal inference. The key dimensions proposed for this project are the following: political knowledge as represented by the level of education, political environment as represented by the geographic locations, and ideology as represented by the party membership. Specifically, I propose the following 16 seeds drawn by the combination of the three dimensions as the various starting points of the snowball-sampling process:

- Education: high school or below, college or above

- Geographic Location: Shanghai (Tier 1, Eastern China), Chongqing (New Tier 1, Western China), Harbin (Tier 2, Northern China), Sanya (Tier 3, Southern China)
- Party Membership: party membership, not party membership

Finally, the snowball-sampling entails the concept of social network. Since it is hard to simulate how the personal connections impact respondents' perception of censored sources quoted by the government outlets in the survey experiments, the snowball-sampling technique can, in theory, provide us with 16 social bubbles to study with. The snowball-sampling usually draws like-minded subjects in the process, and the echo-chamber theory stated that the online media consumption by the public is clustered according to one's social and political values (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson 2014; Barberá et al. 2015; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). Therefore, a homogenous social group is more likely to consume the same kind of news online and reinforce each other's opinion. Then, the social bubbles drawn from the snowball-sampling provides a proxy of the social network online since the like-minded subjects knowing each other are also likely to be connected online, and this enables us to investigate whether the opinions are reinforced by the echo chamber effect among social groups.

The qualitative interviews will serve two different purposes in two different stages of this project. In the pilot stage, the interviews will serve to validate the measurement questions used for the survey experiments. On one hand, to avoid the potential social desirability biases induced by the sensitivity, I used the phrase "public opinion guidance" to substitute the expression of "government censorship." Thus, it is important to validate that the respondents will understand the "public opinion guidance" as "government censorship." In particular, when asked about what the government does with public opinion guidance, the interviewees should reflect on typical ways of government censorship: removing certain contents from the web and discourage certain

topics from online discussions. If a discrepancy is found, the survey questions will be modified to address the problem. For example, the direct use of the word “censorship” should be preferred if the phrase “public opinion guidance” is understood largely different from what this project is referring to.

On the other hand, the concept of democracy and free speech might be heterogeneous between countries. For instance, a strengthened version of the hypothesis tested is that the party propaganda not only discredits the foreign news sources, but also foster a different convention of freedom of speech: the citizens in China may well view their political environment as democratic and free and thus not protesting against the use of censored sources. It would be hard to test conceptualization held by respondents in a survey experiment, but it is possible during a semi-structured interview. Therefore, the interviewees will be asked about how they understand the concept of democracy and free speech, together with the questions about whether they view the mainland China as governed democratically and freely, and why. Instead of modifying the survey question, the conceptualization of democracy and free speech serve to help us understand what the survey question is measuring and how to interpret the result.

Besides validating the measurement, interviews during the pilot stage may discover other alternative hypotheses as well. Currently, the main hypothesis is centered around the manipulation of information credibility to mitigate the potential opposition of government censorship when citizens see censored sources in the party news media. However, it is possible that citizens don’t protest due to other reasons neglected by the researchers. For instance, it might be possible that the porous censorship structure¹⁰ still allows the general public to access foreign social media and news contents through the use of VPN. Then, the perception of Twitter,

¹⁰ By porous censorship, I’m referring to the same concept as defined by Roberts (2018).

Facebook or CNN as “censored sources” among the Chinese citizens might be weaker than I theorized. Thus, the public doesn’t protest against the government censorship when they see those quotes from censored sources because citizens regard those sources as censored yet accessible—which means there is no point protesting against government censorship.

In the post experiment stage, the qualitative data will serve to investigate the causal mechanism behind the quantitative results. First of all, the hypothesis stated that the information without quotes should be perceived as less credible than information quoting from foreign sources. The increase in credibility could be originated from different sources: the information with quotes could be more credible because it is viewed as impartial, or the information could be more credible because the source is appearing to be professional, etc. Then, the semi-structured interviews could collect additional data on the thinking process of the interviewees when they encounter such information in their daily lives and thus reveal which process is more likely to occur. The results obtained from the analysis of the interview data can be cross-examined with the attributes measured in the survey experiments. For instance, if the interviewees are mainly convinced by the information because they perceive the news as impartial, then the accuracy attributes measured by the message credibility section in the survey experiment should also share a heavier weight if a Bayesian factor analysis is conducted on the quantitative results to determine which attributes are more important in the measurement of information credibility.

Furthermore, the hypothesis stated that the government propaganda has shaped the foreign news as not trustworthy. Although the survey responses will help to demonstrate whether the claim is true, it fails to explain the motivations behind. For instance, it could be that the citizens in China don’t trust foreign news media because they think the foreign media is criticizing China frequently but not recognizing the achievements earned by China in recent

years. Or it could be that the citizens in China don't trust foreign news media because they understand that the media environment is getting much more partisan and polarized in recent years among western countries. The former explanation, compared to the latter, would demonstrate a stronger effect of government propaganda on Chinese citizens because the reasoning is not based on a general empirical truth, but a perspective endorsed by the party propaganda in mainland China. Then, if the former mechanism is observed frequently in the semi-structured interviews, we will be more confident in concluding that the party propaganda is effective and is essential for the acquiescence of government censorship among the public.

Finally, the interview data can demonstrate how the interviewees perceive the factual narratives constructed by the party media when quoting from censored sources. Although the factual framing of the information is found by previous research and validated by the automated text analysis in this project, it is still possible that citizens don't perceive the framing as factual. During the interviews, participants will be asked about whether they think the quoted information is intentionally selected by the party and whether they think the opinion held by the party media is more biased than the quoted sources to understand how participants perceive the information. If the interviewees also view the framings as largely factual, then the interview data should contain qualitatively responses showing little evidence of people's belief in selective representation of the quotes and reasonable evidence of people's indifference between the level of biases held by the party media and that held by the censored sources.

Conclusion and Broader Impact

Most literature about foreign news quoted by party media in China focuses on how the narrative is framed to support the party ideology. However, little attention has been devoted to a logically more fundamental question of why the party media quotes foreign sources at all? Also,

although the current literature separates the studies of propaganda and censorship in authoritarian regimes, I argue that since both tools are aimed at controlling public opinions, it is important to recognize interactions between them. My theory will connect these lines of reasoning: the success of government propaganda with foreign news quotes hinges on the success of government censorship in producing a stereotype of foreign media outlets. Finally, the research has a potential for generalizability as it reflects how citizens in authoritarian regimes would react to foreign news reports in an age of political polarization and media distrust.

The research also bears significant empirical implications. Firstly, this research points out the danger of rising polarization in the U.S., which makes it easier for the CCP propaganda organs to find social media posts and news reports undermining the U.S. policies; the U.S. public is continuously providing CCP with materials to consolidate its rule and ideology. Secondly, the research points at the deficiency of the current US foreign policies. Traditionally, the provision of actual political information on sensitive issues and the international pressure from global media are viewed as motivations for Chinese citizens to pursue democracy. However, if my hypothesis is true, then it would be impossible for Chinese citizens to have such motivations given their distrust in foreign media. Finally, the research urges the importance of educating citizens to critically evaluate political information free of stereotypes since the stereotypes are found to consolidate the authoritarian ruling in my theory. My personal connections with the faculties at the MIT Governance Lab and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard can help to disseminate the research findings.

Bibliography

- “2017 -2021 World Values Survey Wave 7: Master Survey Questionnaire.” n.d. World Values Survey.
- Appelman, Alyssa, and S. Shyam Sundar. 2016. “Measuring Message Credibility: Construction and Validation of an Exclusive Scale.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 93 (1): 59–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699015606057>.
- “Asian Barometer Survey.” n.d. Hu Fu Center for Asia Democratic Studies. Accessed November 8, 2020. <http://www.asianbarometer.org/data/core-questionnaire>.
- Barberá, Pablo, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker, and Richard Bonneau. 2015. “Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?” *Psychological Science* 26 (10): 1531–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615594620>.
- Colleoni, Elanor, Alessandro Rozza, and Adam Arvidsson. 2014. “Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data.” *Journal of Communication* 64 (2): 317–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12084>.
- Converse, Philip E. 2006. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964).” *Critical Review* 18 (1–3): 1–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810608443650>.
- Donald, Kinder. 2003. “Belief Systems after Converse.” In *Electoral Democracy*, 13–47. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, c2003.
- Feldman, Stanley. 2003. “Values, Ideology, and the Structure of Political Attitudes.” In *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 477–508. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

- Flaxman, Seth, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao. 2016. "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (S1): 298–320.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw006>.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1981. *What's Fair? : American Beliefs about Distributive Justice*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "Propaganda as Signaling." *Comparative Politics* 47 (4): 419–37.
- . 2017. "A War of (Mis)Information: The Political Effects of Rumors and Rumor Rebuttals in an Authoritarian Country." *British Journal of Political Science; Cambridge* 47 (2): 283–311. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1017/S0007123415000253>.
- Jin Li, Paul R. Brewer, and Barbara L. Ley. 2017. "Chinese News Coverage of Diseases with Domestic versus Foreign Origins: An Analysis of Xinhua Framing of SARS and Ebola." *China Media Research* 13 (2): 75–89.
- Kuang, Xianwen, and Hui Wang. 2020. "Framing International News in China: An Analysis of Trans-Edited News in Chinese Newspapers." *Global Media & China* 5 (2): 188.
- Kuang, Xianwen, and Rining Wei. 2018. "How Framing of Nationally and Locally Sensitive Issues Varies? A Content Analysis of News from Party and Nonparty Newspapers in China." *Journalism* 19 (9/10): 1435–51.
- Lucassen, Teun, and Jan Maarten Schraagen. 2012. "Propensity to Trust and the Influence of Source and Medium Cues in Credibility Evaluation." *Journal of Information Science* 38 (6): 566–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551512459921>.
- McCroskey, James C., and Jason J. Teven. 1999. "Goodwill: A Reexamination of the Construct and Its Measurement." *Communication Monographs* 66 (1): 90–103.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759909376464>.

Metzger, Miriam J., Andrew J. Flanagin, Keren Eyal, Daisy R. Lemus, and Robert M. Mccann.

2003. "Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment." *Annals of the International Communication Association* 27 (1): 293–335.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2003.11679029>.

Pan, Jennifer, and Yiqing Xu. 2018. "China's Ideological Spectrum." *The Journal of Politics* 80 (1): 254–73. <https://doi.org/10.1086/694255>.

Roberts, Margaret E. 2018. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China's Great Firewall*. xii, 271 pages; vols. xii, 271 pages; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, [2018].

Rudolph, Jorg-Meinhard. 1984. "Cankao Xiaoxi: Foreign News in the Propaganda System of the People's Republic of China." *Occasional Papers/Reprints Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 1984 (6): 1–x.

Zhang, Xiaodong, and Mark Boukes. 2019. "How China's Flagship News Program Frames 'the West': Foreign News Coverage of CCTV's Xinwen Lianbo before and during Xi Jinping's Presidency." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12 (4): 414–30.

Appendix A. Experimental Materials

Original Content: “Count Every Vote” vs. “Stop Stealing the Election” – The US Presidential Election to Cost 13.9 Billion¹¹

Control:

Title: “Count Every Vote” vs. “Stop Stealing the Election”

Source: The Global Times

Main Text:

The United States is largely polarized on the outcome of its recent presidential election. While the supporters of Joe Biden argue that every vote in the swing states should be counted, the supporters of Donald Trump criticize that the liberals are trying to steal the election. The chaos has illustrated that the US is no longer the torch of democratic values and the American system is slipping towards a failure.

Treated Group I:

Title: “Count Every Vote” vs. “Stop Stealing the Election” — Worries Mounted Among Foreign Media

Source: The Global Times

Main Text:

The United States is largely polarized on the outcome of its recent presidential election. While the supporters of Joe Biden argue that every vote in the swing states should be counted, the supporters of Donald Trump criticize that the liberals are trying to steal the election. The chaos has illustrated that the US is no longer the torch of democratic values and the American system is slipping towards a failure.

¹¹ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NTE5MzQzMA==&mid=2655339584&idx=1&sn=d99f9b15bd279b95c291654d2a3f966f&chksm=84c5a979b3b2206fda40feba66f66ea694afc75908c54422ca1da8782d24bd55bee74f963e4d#rd

A report from Bloomberg commented: “In 2020, almost no country in the world would once again look at the US and say: ‘We hope our political institution will function as well as those in the US.’”

[Screenshot of Bloomberg]

Treated Group II:

Title: “Count Every Vote” vs. “Stop Stealing the Election” — Worries Mounted Among Twitter Users

Source: The Global Times

Main Text:

The United States is largely polarized on the outcome of its recent presidential election. While the supporters of Joe Biden argue that every vote in the swing states should be counted, the supporters of Donald Trump criticize that the liberals are trying to steal the election. The chaos has illustrated that the US is no longer the torch of democratic values and the American system is slipping towards a failure.

A twitter user commented: “Counting legally cast ballots after a constitutional election is not a coup. It is how democracy works. Stop trying to turn America into a radicalized fascist autocracy. #EveryVoteCounts”

[Screenshot of Twitter]

Treated Group III:

Title: “Count Every Vote” vs. “Stop Stealing the Election” — Worries Mounted in The US

Source: The Global Times

Main Text:

The United States is largely polarized on the outcome of its recent presidential election. While the supporters of Joe Biden argue that every vote in the swing states should be counted, the supporters of Donald Trump criticize that the liberals are trying to steal the election. The chaos has illustrated that the US is no longer the torch of democratic values and the American system is slipping towards a failure.

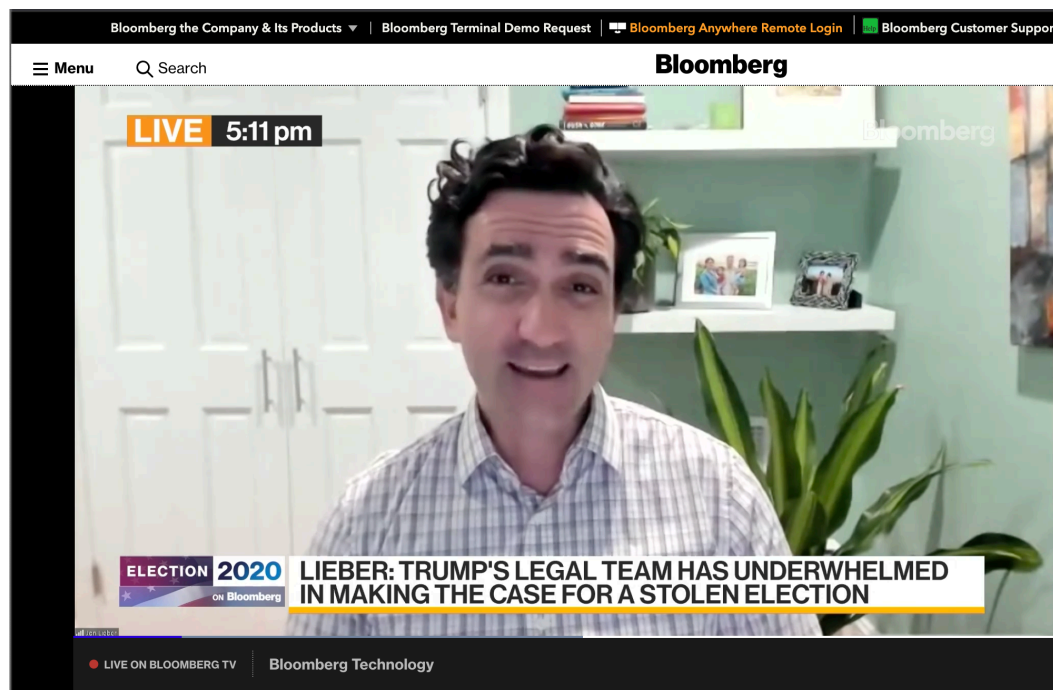
A report from Bloomberg commented: “In 2020, almost no country in the world would once again look at the US and say: ‘We hope our political institution will function as well as those in the US.’”

[Screenshot of Bloomberg]

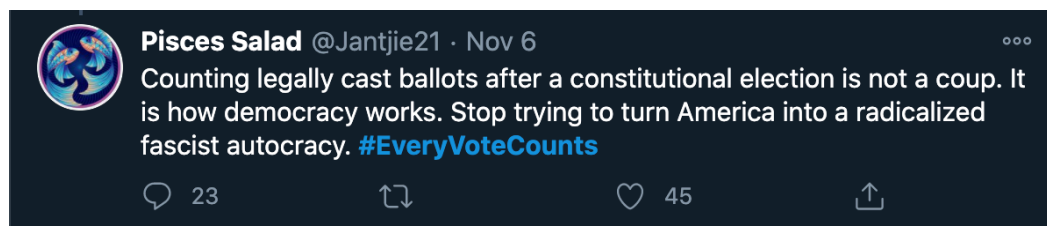
The general public is also worried about the situation. A twitter user commented: “Counting legally cast ballots after a constitutional election is not a coup. It is how democracy works. Stop trying to turn America into a radicalized fascist autocracy. #EveryVoteCounts”

[Screenshot of Twitter]

[Screenshot of Bloomberg]:



[Screenshot of Twitter]:



Appendix B. Survey Experiment Questionnaire

Participation Consent

Thanks for participating in a research study titled “Attacking with Their Own Words: The Use of Censored Sources by the Party Media in China.” I will now describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to take the survey. All data will be discarded and will not be stored if you don’t consent at this point. This study is being led by researchers in Department of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to identify the impacts of quotes from foreign sources used by Party Media in China among Chinese Nationals.

What we will ask you to do

I will ask you to provide honest responses towards several questions concerning the credibility of the information presented, your political ideology, political attitudes, political knowledge, and your perception of government censorship etc. The total duration of the survey is expected to be 20-25 minutes.

Risks and Discomforts

As Qualtrics will protect your privacy and personal identity, the survey experiment will not pose more risk than stated before. We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the internet. We do not collect any biologically identifiable information from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your name, address, or personal ID in any form during the study.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, and I consent to take part in the study.

Demographics: Please fill out the following part based on your personal circumstances

1. Gender

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Would rather not tell

2. Age

- a. 18-22
- b. 23-28
- c. 28-40
- d. 40-55
- e. 55+

3. Education

- a. Highschool or below
- b. Some college or equivalent
- c. Bachelor's or equivalent
- d. Master or equivalent
- e. PhD or above

4. Party-Membership

- a. Party Member
- b. Not Party Member
- c. Pre-Party Member

5. Occupation

- a. Student or Self-employed
- b. Employee of State-owned Enterprise
- c. Employee of foreign-invested Enterprise
- d. Employee of Private Enterprise
- e. Employee of Hybrid-invested Enterprise
- f. Others

6. Annual Income (Include Part-time Income)

- a. < ¥36,000
- b. ¥36,000 – ¥144,000
- c. ¥144,000 – ¥300,000

- d. ¥300,000 – ¥420,000
- e. ¥420,000 – ¥660,000
- f. ¥660,000 – ¥960,000
- g. > ¥960,000

7. I lived in mainland China for

- a. 15-18 years
- b. 18-22 years
- c. 22-28 years
- d. 28 years or above

8. I lived in [the Current Country] for

- a. 0-2 years
- b. 2-7 years
- c. 7-12 years
- d. 12 years or above

Political Ideology and Political Attitudes¹²: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.

1. I'm interested in political affairs. [interest in politics]
2. We should strive to learn from multi-party institutions and ideas. [ideology]
3. We should not maintain our own institutions and way of life, instead, we should become more and more like other countries. [ideology]
4. I think our country's current political system is inappropriate for the country. [ideology]
5. People should have universal suffrage even if they have not been educated about democracy. [ideology]
6. Lawyers should always do their utmost to defend clients even if the client has committed a crime. [ideology]

¹² (Pan and Xu 2018; Huang 2017; "Asian Barometer Survey" n.d.)

7. Individuals should be able to own, buy and sell land. [ideology]
 8. The interests of state-owned enterprises should not be considered as part of the national interests from the economic perspective. [ideology]
 9. Instead of having a strong leader or experts to decide things, we should allow opposition party to compete for power. [ideology]
-
1. I'm satisfied with the overall situation now in mainland China. [regime support]
 2. In general, we can trust our government's work in improving public safety and protecting people's lives and properties. [regime support]
 3. In general, we can trust that our government will give equal treatments to Chinese citizens and foreign citizens, without giving foreign citizens preferential treatments over Chinese citizens. [regime support]
 4. In general, I think the corruption in politics and government is under control in China. [regime support]
 5. In general, I think the gap between the wealthy and the poor has been narrow in China. [regime support]
 6. In general, I think the government is good at prevent crimes and maintaining order in China. [regime support]

Political Knowledge¹³: Please select the appropriate answers for the questions below.

1. Who is the president of China?
 - a. Hu Jintao
 - b. Xi Jinping
 - c. Kim Jong-un
 - d. Zhang Qun
2. Who is the prime minister of China?
 - a. Zhu Rongji
 - b. Jiang Zemin

¹³ (Huang 2015)

- c. Li Keqiang
 - d. Wang Huning
3. What is the highest decision-making body within Chinese political system?
- a. Chinese Communist Party
 - b. Standing Committee of the Political Bureau
 - c. Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
 - d. National People's Congress

Knowledge on Government Censorship: Please identify True or False for the following statements¹⁴

- 1. I think we have public opinion guidance in China.
- 2. I think we can't freely access foreign news media in China.
- 3. I think we can't freely access foreign social media such as Facebook and Twitter in China.
- 4. I think there is a specific definition on what topics are "politically sensitive."
- 5. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by robots.
- 6. I think public opinion guidance is solely conducted by the government institutions.
- 7. I think the online public opinion guidance is conducted only on a small scale.
- 8. I think the government don't have a clear standard for public opinion guidance.

Personal Characteristics¹⁵: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.

- 1. Even if parent's demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.
- 2. When one has a conflict with a neighbor, the best way to deal with it is to accommodate the other person.
- 3. A person should not insist on his own opinion if his co-workers disagree with him.
- 4. For the sake of the family or other social groups, the individual should put his personal interests second.

¹⁴ Public Opinion Guidance (輿情引导) is a practice identical to censorship. I use the indirect term instead of censorship to prevent triggering preference falsification.

¹⁵ ("Asian Barometer Survey" n.d.)

5. When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.

Evaluation of the Quality of Democracy¹⁶: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.

1. I would rate my country as a full democracy.
2. I would say my country well sustains democratic values such as equal rights and free speech.
3. I think the votes are counted fairly in [Country].
4. I think the opposition candidates are not prevent from running in [Country].
5. I think the media is not particularly favoring the governing party in [Country].
6. I think the voters are not bribed in [Country].
7. I think journalists provide fair coverage of elections in [Country].
8. I think election officials are fair in [Country].
9. I think voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections in [Country].
10. I think women have equal opportunities to run the office in [Country].

Evaluation of Censorship Legitimacy: Please rate the following statements based on your perception. 1 means completely disagree and 7 means completely agree.

1. Citizens should not be allowed to say whatever they want online.
2. The online behavior of citizens could be monitored by the government if necessary.
3. The use of VPN (a technique to hide your actual IP address online) should be banned if necessary.
4. Citizens should not express personal grievance online if it can cause social unrest.
5. Online discussions should not involve important political figures.

Source Credibility: Please rate the following statements based on your perception of information presented.

¹⁶ (“Asian Barometer Survey” n.d.; “2017 -2021 World Values Survey Wave 7: Master Survey Questionnaire,” n.d.)

Goodwill:¹⁷

Doesn't Cares about me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Care about me
Doesn't have my interests at heart	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Have my interests at heart
Not self-centered	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Self-centered
Unconcerned with me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Concerned with me
Not understanding	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Understanding

Trustworthiness:¹⁸

Dishonest	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Honest
Untrustworthy	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Trustworthy
Dishonorable	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Honorable
Immoral	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Moral
Unethical	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Ethical

Expertise:¹⁹

Doesn't have sociability	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Has sociability
Poor composure	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Good composure
Poor quality check process	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Good quality check process

Medium Credibility: Please rate the following statements based on your perception of the information presented:

Media Dependence:

1. How often do you use WeChat?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<1/month	1/month	3/month	1/week	3/week	Bi-daily	daily

2. How many kinds of social media do you use besides WeChat to obtain political information?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
>5	five	four	three	two	one	none

Trustworthiness:²⁰

1. Please rank the following statements on the scale from 1 (least) to 7 (most):
- When you are looking for information, how often would you use the medium presented as opposed to other software?

¹⁷ (McCroskey and Teven 1999)

¹⁸ (McCroskey and Teven 1999)

¹⁹ (Metzger et al. 2003)

²⁰ (Lucassen and Schraagen 2012)

- b. How much confidence do you have in the people with whom you interact through the medium presented?
 - c. If you are in need of information, how confident are you that you can find it on the medium presented?
2. Please answer the following questions: What do you think is the credibility of the medium presented?

Perceived Professionalism:²¹ Please rank the following statements on the scale from 1 (least) to 7 (most)

1. How much do you trust the institutes and people ‘running the medium’?
2. How much confidence do you have in the expertise of people with whom you interact through the medium presented?
3. If you are in need of information, how confident are you that you can find a professional person on the medium presented?

Message Credibility: Please rate the following statements based on your perception of the information presented:

Accuracy:²²

Not detailed	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Detailed
Verbose	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Concise
Not opinioned	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Opinioned
Subjective	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Objective
Non-representative	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Representative
Not complete	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Complete

Believability:²³

Dishonest	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Honest
Untrustworthy	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Trustworthy
Immoral	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Moral
Unethical	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Ethical
Inaccurate	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Accurate

Authenticity:²⁴

Error	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Error-free
False statements	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	True statements
Not well-written	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Well-written

²¹ (Lucassen and Schraagen 2012)

²² (Appelman and Sundar 2016)

²³ (McCroskey and Teven 1999)

²⁴ (Appelman and Sundar 2016)

Not transparent	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Transparent
Not comprehensive	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Comprehensive

Appendix C. Interview Questions

Validity of the Interview: ☐ Valid ☐ Invalid

No. ☐☐☐

Background Information (ask in the end)

Name: _____ **Gender:** _____ **Date of Birth:** ____ / ____ / ____

Party Membership: ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Probation **Marriage Status:** ☐ Single ☐ Married

Education: _____ **Years Lived in Mainland:** _____ **Years Lived in [Country]:** _____

Contact: _____

Media Consumption (ask in front)

Top 3 Social Media Use: _____ / _____ / _____

Main Source of Political Information: _____

General Attitude and Conceptualization (ask at the very end)

Do you consider yourself interested in politics?

How would you define a democracy? What are some essential elements for a democracy? Would you say China is a democracy?

How would you define freedom of speech? Would you say that you now enjoy the free speech?

What do you think the government usually do with “public opinion guidance”?

Attitudes Towards Regime/Democracy

Have you ever heard of a story undermining your trust in the government? If so, what is the most impressive one you have ever heard?

What kinds of events are most likely to undermine your trust in the government?

If you heard about some government criticism online, would you do a fact check? Would you spread the information? Why or why not?

Do you care about whether a country is a democracy? Why or why not?

Government Censorship

In your opinion, what is a government censorship?

Have you ever seen a government censorship imposed on someone else?

Have you ever experienced a government censorship yourself?

Can you give some examples on topics you think will be censored by the government?

Have you ever seen some posts online which you think are more likely to be censored?

Can you give me an example on the events that you think the government conducted censorship in the past? (If the example is given, I'd like to know how your opinions about the event change when the censorship is conducted)

Do you think it is easy or hard to detect censorship? Why?

Do you think censorship is sometimes justifiable? If so, when? If not, why?

Will you withhold controversial opinions in online discussions? Why?

Do you feel comfortable in criticizing politicians or the government online? Why?

Would you advocate for a freer media environment than now? Why?

Political Sensitivity

Can you give some examples on topics you think is politically sensitive? Do you think they will be censored by the government?

Have you ever written any political comments online? If so, do you think you have ever written any "politically sensitive" comments?

Do you think other people will write politically sensitive comments online?

Do you think there exists risk in discussing politics online?

Credibility

Do you view foreign news media as credible when they report on China? Why?

Do you view the party media as credible and factual? Why?

Would you pay attention to the information from Twitter or foreign news sources when they appear in the party media? Do you think these sources are usually censored? How do you feel about the information quoted from other sources contribute to the credibility of the news?

Participation Consent

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “Attacking with Their Own Words: The Use of Censored Sources by the Party Media in China” I will describe this study to you before you consent and proceed to participate in the research. This study is being led by Department of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to identify the attributes related to information credibility within online posts similar to the setting of social media WeChat.

What I will ask you to do

I will ask you some questions related to your belief in political rumors, government censorship and media credibility. I am expecting honest answers to your best knowledge.

Risks and Discomforts

I anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than minimal risks. I do not collect any biological-identifiable information, such as finger prints and blood samples, from you. Therefore, please do not provide us your sensitive personal information, such as your SSN, address, or personal ID in any form during the study. Also, I’d like you to understand:

- The response will not be linked to you personally (The preserving record will identify you with a unique categorical number instead of your actual name)
- The recording of the interview process is for research purpose only and will not be disclosed in any form to the third party
- Both the interviewer and the interviewee will not disclose the sensitive discussions during the interview in any form to the third party

Statement of Consent

☐ I have read the above information, I understand that the conversation will be recorded, and I consent to take part in the study.

☐ I have read the above information, and I won’t take part in the study.

Signature of the Participant: _____

Date: _____