Nowhere is the effort to control the flow of digital information more extensive and sustained than it is in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses a wide range of tools and strategies to achieve two related, but distinct, goals of digital information control: to shape public knowledge and to "guide" the public in the aftermath of sudden, unexpected events. Controlling social media is especially relevant to the second goal, and the CCP uses strategies of content removal (censorship) and content generation (propaganda) to pursue this aim. Recent studies of the Chinese internet and social media show that the CCP has adapted quickly to new digital communication technologies, though it is in sometimes unexpected ways, and CCP control of Chinese social media is integral to its efforts to shape public beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Nowhere is the effort to control the flow of digital information more extensive and sustained than it is in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses a wide range of tools and strategies to achieve two related, but distinct, goals of digital information control: to shape public knowledge and to "guide" the public in the aftermath of sudden, unexpected events. The first goal pertains to the regulation of knowledge about historical events and ideas. This is achieved through censorship as well as through strategies that frame ideas and historical events such that public understandings and interpretations align with those of the CCP. The second goal centers around mobilizing rapid responses to "guide" the public in response to unanticipated events (e.g., natural and man-made disasters) so as to mitigate any threats to legitimacy and limit restrictions the public may place on government policy choices.

Shaping Public Knowledge

Education, cultural governance, and traditional media play crucial roles in the CCP's pursuit of the goal of shaping public knowledge.[1] Social media, which is primarily focused on the here and now, is less central. However, China's censorship of the global internet through the so-called "Great Firewall," as well as social media keyword filtering and internet search filtering of domestic digital platforms, support this goal. China's Great Firewall is a set of technical strategies and regulations that selectively block access to websites such as google.com, Wikipedia.org, *nytimes.com,* and platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, for people physically located in China. Research shows that when websites and platforms are

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[1] Elizabeth Perry, "Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: 'Re-orienting' Party Propaganda," in *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power*, ed. Vivienne Shu and Patricia M. Thornton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 29–55.

blocked, not only is the public's ability to proactively search for information cut off, incidental exposure to knowledge about history, economics, and politics decreases —in other words, opportunities to learn new things are reduced.[2] Keyword filtering refers to the words and phrases that will not be publicly viewable if included on a social media post.[3] Search filtering occurs when internet search engines remove or downrank search results.

Research finds that the Chinese public has low demand for uncensored information. Observational studies of VPN usage suggest that the cost and trouble of installing censorship circumvention technology may suppress its uptake.[4] More surprisingly, in a large-scale randomized experiment, college students in China were given an opportunity to use a high-quality censorship circumvention technology to access the uncensored global internet.[5] However, the experiment finds that few students used the technology. In other words, reducing the costs of censorship circumvention do not solve problems of uptake. Instead, the experiment suggests that students do not circumvent censorship because they do not know what additional information they might find in an uncensored environment.

In the age of social media, audiences are inundated with content. The volume of available content vastly exceeds any individual's ability to consume. This dynamic holds also for people living in censored information environments. The public cannot demand that which is unknown to them, and when faced with a deluge of digital information, many assume that they have access to full information. The same low demand influences content creation and searches. Few Chinese social media users know enough about key historical events, such as the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement, to search for more information about it or to post discussions about it on social media. This low demand is likely the result of education, culture, media exposure, and other long-term CCP strategies to shape public knowledge, but low demand and censorship are self-reinforcing. Because demand is low, few people will seek information about events and ideas that are censored in China. However, if an individual does seek out such information, domestic search filtering and Great Firewall censorship make it difficult to find anything of relevance and keyword filtering limits the ability to turn to social media to seek information or to share information. These factors then reinforce the misperception that there is no new information out there and that the censored information environment provides full information. Experimental results show that only when individuals are proactively exposed to uncensored

[2] Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, " Censorship's Effect on Incidental Exposure to Information: Evidence from Wikipedia," *SAGE Open* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

[3] Jeffrey Knockel, Christopher Parsons, Lotus Ruan, Ruohan Xiong, Jedidiah Crandall, and Ron Deibert, "We Chat, They Watch: How International Users Unwittingly Build Up Wechat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus," Citizen Lab Research Report no. 127, University of Toronto, May 2020 .

[4] Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[5] Yuyu Chen, and David Y. Yang, "The Impact of Media Censorship: 1984 or Brave New World?" *American Economic Review* 109, no. 6 (2019): 2294–2332.

information do they realize what they have been missing and they begin to demand uncensored information.[6]

Altogether, this empirical evidence of low demand for uncensored information suggests the CCP enjoys substantial success in achieving its goal of shaping public knowledge. What about "guiding" the public during sudden, unexpected events?

"Guiding" the Public

When unforeseen events occur—think the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed rail collision, the on-going Covid-19 pandemic—the Chinese public often turns to social media to obtain information, seek assistance, air grievances, and lodge complaints.[7] This means that social media is crucial to the CCP's ability to guide the public and to shape opinions and behaviors. In fact, the 2018 "Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of New Media in Government Affairs" explicitly state that a goal of social media under CCP rule is to guide public opinion, especially in response to sudden and unexpected events.[8]

The fact that China's social media market is dominated by domestic firms gives the CCP a large advantage when it comes to using censorship to control public sentiment in the wake of unanticipated events.[9] This market dynamic allows the Chinese government to quickly, reliably, and selectively eliminate content it deems to be inappropriate. This selective removal of content—as opposed to coarse censorship tactics, such as blocking apps and websites or shutting down the internet—decreases the coordination potential of social media and diminishes the reliability of information. For most other governments around the world, the market for social media content is dominated by multinational firms such as Meta and Google. Because their citizens share information and coordinate on these multinational social media platforms, it is difficult for these governments to selectively remove content. Governments must petition multinational social media platforms for content removal. It may take days or even weeks to receive a response, and the response may not be the one the government desires. Therefore, these governments instead rely on imprecise and sweeping censorship strategies to control content. Such strategies often backfire because the act of censorship is highly visible and it directs attention to the object of censorship.[10]

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[6] Ibid. William R. Hobbs, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Sudden Censorship Can Increase Access to Information," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 621–636.

[7] Yingdan Lu, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu, "Public Sentiment on Chinese Social Media during the Emergence of COVID-19," *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media* 1 (2021): 1–47.

[8] 关于推进政务新媒体健康有序 发展的意见, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/27/content_5352739.htm.

[9] Jennifer Pan, "How Market Dynamics of Domestic and Foreign Social Media Firms Shape Strategies of Internet Censorship," *Problems of Post-Communism* 64, nos. 3–4 (2017): 167–188.

[10] Sue Curry Jansen, and Brian Martin, "The Streisand Effect and Censorship Backfire," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 656–671; Jennifer Pan, and Alexandra A.

In the wake of sudden, unexpected events, the CCP, working in concert with Chinese social media platforms, can selectively remove content related to such events. Research on digital censorship in China shows that this content-removal censorship aims to remove all discussions related to events that have the potential to mobilize the public. There is debate about whether the scope of Chinese online censorship during the rule of Xi Jinping has expanded beyond censoring content with the potential to mobilize. However, there is consensus among academics that censorship of social media content pertaining to events with collective action potential remains in effect today.

Even though selective removal of content is less visible than most other censorship strategies, during highly salient events when social media users are paying close attention to new information, selective content removal may still be visible enough that it backfires. During the Shanghai Covid-19 lockdown of 2022, Chinese social media users were highly aware of the activities of social media censors, and they pointed to censorship as evidence of government shortcomings. When censorship is visible in this way, it does the opposite of guiding public attitudes and behaviors in the direction the government desires. When censorship is visible, it can redirect more attention to the object of censorship. Therefore, censorship alone may not be sufficient to manage public opinion in the wake of unforeseen events.

The CCP also utilizes covert and overt information production strategies to manage public sentiment in the wake of unexpected incidents. Analysis based on leaked government data shows that the CCP mobilizes large numbers of party and government bureaucracies—most of which are unrelated to propaganda—in a coordinated manner to fabricate social media posts as if they were the opinions of ordinary people.[11] This covert strategy floods social media with irrelevant content that redirects public attention away from substantive debates and sudden events. Because social media platforms have more information than any user can consume, content is often ranked by machine learning algorithms. This means that mass, coordinated actions to flood social media can drown out relevant information. As a result, when a sudden event occurs and users turn to social media to find or share information, it may be difficult for them to find relevant information. Even if a user shares information, others may not find it. These factors can generate the misperception that others are uninterested in what has occurred, which may in turn decrease the willingness of those who have firsthand experiences to share information, reinforcing a spiral of silence.

Covert strategies can be highly effective, but they incur a cost. Manipulating the online information environment hampers the information gathering efforts of the CCP in the longer term. National-level elections provide political elites with one of the clearest signals of public preferences. In the absence of elections, those in power must gather information, especially attitudes toward lower-level bureaucrats and officials tasked with governance, about public

Siegel, "How Saudi Crackdowns Fail to Silence Online Dissent," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (2020): 109–125.

[11] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501.

preferences by other means, When the information environment is manipulated in order to shape public opinion, incentives for bureaucrats and political competitors to manipulate information for their own benefit are created—for example, to obscure corruption and malfeasance so they can extract resources and benefit materially from their positions of power.[12] Thus, covert manipulation of the online information environment makes it more difficult for those in power to gather reliable and accurate information over the longer term.

In recent years, the CCP has made clear that within its domestic social media sphere, propaganda agencies should avoid using disinformation and avoid artificially manipulating metrics of influence. Instead, Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of "maintaining a clean and positive online space."[13] The 2018 "Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of New Media in Government Affairs" emphasize that government social media accounts must disseminate truthful information in a timely manner and must eliminate online rumors.[14] In 2019, the State Council revised the evaluation metrics for local government management of social media accounts and included penalties for fabricating views and likes and dislikes.[15]

Instead of covertly manipulating the online information environment, the CCP can overtly influence public sentiment by inundating online space with content from CCP affiliates. Instead of putting out content as if it comes from ordinary people, the idea is to put out content from accounts that do not hide their government affiliation. To do this, various levels and functional agencies of the CCP and government must have social media accounts so they can communicate directly with the public. As such, the CCP requires that all local governments establish their own social media accounts.[16] In addition to establishing CCP-affiliated accounts on more established social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, the CCP has emphasized the need to dominate the newer social media platforms, including short-video sharing platforms such as Douyin and live-streaming platforms such as Kuaishou. Douyin, the Chinese branding of TikTok owned by the same parent company ByteDance, makes it extremely easy for users to create and share videos. Unlike traditional social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, content only appears as videos that you scroll up and down to see more, not as a mix of text, images, and videos. Douyin videos are tall (filling the entire mobile screen) rather than square or landscape

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[12] Jennifer Pan, and Kaiping Chen, "Concealing Corruption: How Chinese Officials Distort Upward Reporting of Online Grievances," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 602–620.

[13] http://www.xinhuanet.com//2018-08/26/c_1123331382.htm.

[14] 关于推进政务新媒体健康有序 发展的意见, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/27/content_5352739.htm.

[15] See "Government Website and Government New Media Inspection Indicators" (政府网站与政务新媒体检查指标) and "Annual Assessment Indicators for Government Website and Government New Media Supervision" (政府网站与 政务新媒体监管工作年度考核指标), https://www.xuexi.cn/8048041cc7afff9e99f5c07b3440115a/e43e220633a65f9b6d8b53712cba9caa.html.

[16] 关于进一步加强政府信息公开回应社会关切提升政府公信力的意见, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2013-10/18/content 1219.htm.

like the videos on YouTube. While Douyin, like other social media platforms, encourages users to engage with other users, having a network—of friends or of followers —is not essential to the Douyin experience. Douyin fills users' feeds before they follow a single person, and even after following others, users' feeds do not prioritize or only contain content from those they follow. Live-streaming platforms allow users to broadcast live, with the same one-to-many dynamic as live television broadcasts. However, in contrast to traditional broadcast media, anyone can live-stream, and social media live-streaming technology allows live-streamers and their audiences to interact during broadcasts.

The CCP presence on Douyin and live-streaming platforms has exploded in recent years. In addition, Chinese state-media accounts have some of the largest followings. For example, on Douyin, *People's Daily* has 150 million followers, which is even more followers than Andy Lau and Chen He have combined.[17] CCTV News is a record holder for the longest non-stop hours of streaming on Kuaishou.[18] Importantly, the overall number of CCP-affiliated accounts has grown exponentially. As of 2020, the Chinese government reported that 25,313 accounts affiliated with the CCP had been established on Douyin.[19] Through an hourly collection of Douyin trending video made between March 18, 2020 and June 17, 2020, research shows that over 40 percent of trending videos on Douyin are produced by accounts affiliated with the CCP or the Chinese government.[20] This stands in stark contrast to TikTok, where not a single top 100 account is the account of a media outlet, politician, or political organization.

The success and penetration of CCP-affiliated social media accounts is likely aided by the financial and legal influence the CCP holds over Chinese social media platforms. For example, what subjects are listed as trending topics on Douyin may be influenced by the CCP,[21] and speculations abound that Chinese social media ranking algorithms prioritize CCP-affiliated content. Over the past decade, the success of CCP-affiliated accounts may also be supported by repression and censorship of dissenting online voices. Starting from the high-profile arrest of public intellectuals such as Xue Manzi in 2013, the CCP has penalized outspoken and influential critics. Chinese social media platforms have also steadily banned the accounts of individuals who express different views. As a result, Chinese social media contains fewer voices that are critical of the government, and CCP-affiliated social media accounts do not need to compete for audience attention with those who hold different views on politics, economics, and social issues.

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[17] https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAA8U_l6rBzmy7bcy6xOJel4v0RzoR_wfAubGPeJimN__4.

[18] https://chozan.co/is-kuaishou-the-future-of-live-streaming-in-china/.

[19] "The 46th China Statistical Report on Internet Development," CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center), 2020, https://www.cnnic.com.cn/idr/reportdownloads/202012/p020201201530023411644.pdf.

[20] Yingdan Lu, and Jennifer Pan, "The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos," *Computational Communication Research* 4, no. 1 (2022): 68–97.

[21] Ibid.

However, government and party social media accounts still need to actively compete for audience attention. CCP-affiliated content producers face intense pressures to demonstrate their effectiveness on social media against quantified metrics such as views and likes.[22] CCP-affiliated accounts are not competing for audience attention against political opponents or critics, but because the CCP wants to be able to command public attention when unforeseen events occur, the CCP is competing against celebrities and online influencers for audience attention. An analysis of the titles of nearly 200,000 posts made by over two hundred Chinese city-level governments on WeChat shows that clickbait is heavily used to gain public attention.[23] In addition, CCP-affiliated accounts are turning to non-political content to capture audiences. Large-scale analyses of content produced by CCP-affiliated accounts show that content related to CCP ideology, the activities of high-level central leaders, and even performance legitimacy is limited. Instead, content from CCP-affiliated accounts is often apolitical, focusing on relationships among ordinary people, entertainment, and local tourism.[24]

The use of clickbait and non-political content to capture audience attention can facilitate audience reach when sudden, unanticipated events occur through three pathways. First, getting users to click on content from CCP-affiliated accounts can create a habit of clicking on content from that same account simply due to name recognition. Because users scrolling through their social media content recognize the name of a source, they may be more likely to click on content from that same source in the future. Second, having clicked on content from a CCP-affiliated social media account, users may become more familiar with the account and be more favorably disposed toward it. This is especially true if users not only click on the content but also "like" the content. This favorable disposition can lead to a reduced sense of distance from the CCP social media account, thus propelling users toward a higher level of receptivity to all content from that account. Note that this second pathway differs from the first, which deals only with name recognition. This second pathway relates to legitimacy, as favorable feelings about the account spill over to the content the account produces in the wake of unforeseen events. The final pathway is algorithmic. Clicking on posts from CCP social media accounts can create a pattern of usage that may be picked up by the ranking and recommendation algorithms of platforms, resulting in more recommended content from the same source in the future.

It is important to note that unlike traditional propaganda, which seeks first and foremost to change attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, the covert and overt information production strategies described above aim to influence behavior. Covert information strategies such as the coordinated creation of irrelevant content can prevent people from finding or even encountering information related to issues they would otherwise have supported and activities such as protests that they otherwise would have joined. Overt information strategies aim to capture audience attention—to shape the behavior of users on social media. Beliefs and so-called second-order beliefs (i.e., beliefs about what others believe) are likely influenced by these information production strategies, but indoctrination is not the sole objective of these efforts.

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[22] Yingdan Lu, and Jennifer Pan, "Capturing Clicks: How the Chinese Government Uses Clickbait to Compete for Visibility," *Political Communication* 38, nos. 1–2 (2021): 23–54.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

What happens when unexpected events occur outside of China? The Great Firewall imposes stringent limits on what information can flow into China. However, China is not completely disconnected from the global internet. Events and ideas originating outside of the country's borders that have implications for domestic politics will inevitably appear. Research shows that only a small fraction of discussions with relevance to China that garner global public attention will flow into China.[25] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese state-controlled media and Chinese commercialized media play a key role in facilitating these inflows of information. However, Chinese social media users without any traditional media or CCP affiliations consistently transmit information from the outside world into China. This implies that while censorship and state controls on media severely limit the inflow of global information to China, social media provides some opportunities for non-institutional actors to influence the information environment.

These results suggest that when sudden, unexpected events capture public attention, the CCP can deploy a wide range of strategies to "guide" the public, shaping their attitudes and behaviors. The public uproar over the draconian Covid-19 lockdowns occurring across China this spring is precisely such an event. Have these strategies been deployed? No systematic empirical analysis has been published on these recent events, but anecdotes reveal many instances of selective content removal, search filtering, as well as other information production tactics at work, suggesting that the CCP is indeed using a range of strategies to try to control public anger and discontent. Stringent lockdowns have been implemented in many regions of China, but the Shanghai lockdown has received the most attention. *China Digital Times* has documented numerous instances where social media posts—texts, images, and videos—made by those living in Shanghai, which describe what is happening in their neighborhoods, have been censored. For example, content related to food scarcities, deaths of the elderly, unaccompanied infants in quarantine, and conflicts and violence between residents and the ubiquitous "Big White" (大白) lockdown enforcers in protective suits, has been removed. Leaked censorship documents reveal directives sent to all platforms ordering the removal of videos, screenshots, and all related content, such as the "Voices of April" compilation of audio snippets from Shanghai in April 2022.[26]

In addition to the removal of content that the CCP finds objectionable, CCP-affiliated accounts have also been actively producing a high volume of content on social media platforms, such as Douyin, Weibo, and WeChat during this period. A look at the Douyin feeds of a handful of Douyin users who in the past consumed content from CCP-affiliated accounts reveals feeds inundated with videos from CCP-affiliated outlets about Covid-19 case tracking as well as videos emphasizing the dedication and sacrifice of front-line health workers. Videos from accounts, such as the state-controlled Shanghai television station, Dragon TV, contain reports of

[25] Yingdan Lu, Jack Schaefer, Kunwoo Park, Jungseock Joo, and Jennifer Pan, "How Information Flows from the World to China," Working Paper, 2022.

[26] https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/04/minitrue-silence-the-voices-of-april-viral-video-on-shanghai-lockdown-full-english-transcript/.

local case numbers and scenes of orderly Covid-19 containment measures and news,[27] while videos from the Pudong Public Security account show recordings of police officers in protective gear delivering food to thankful residents, police driving a 4-year old boy home from quarantine to reunite with his parents, and public security officers engaging in other good deeds for grateful residents.[28] Searching for the term "Shanghai Covid-19" on Douyin returns only content about case numbers and videos about the peaceful and orderly implementation of Covid-19 control measures produced in large part by accounts affiliated with the CCP, painting a drastically different picture of Shanghai in April 2022.

The salience and severity of the Shanghai lockdown have made censorship and government information manipulation efforts visible to some Chinese social media users. Some Weibo users have noticed that they can comment on posts after midnight and this content will stay up until 4 am when the censors are back at work. It should be noted that Shanghai residents, relative to those living in other regions of China, are more connected to global social media and more active on Chinese social media. Less is known about lockdowns in other regions of China such as Jilin. This may be because residents are satisfied with what the government has done in those regions, but it is also possible that we have heard little because the CCP has been more successful in regions other than Shanghai in suppressing dissent, "guiding" the public, and controlling information dissemination.

In sum, the CCP deploys a large arsenal of tools and strategies to control China's information environment to shape what the public knows and to control how the public reacts and behaves after the occurrence of salient, unanticipated events. Social media is especially crucial to the second goal, and the CCP uses both the removal of content (censorship) as well as the generation of content (propaganda) to achieve it. In imposing control over Chinese social media, censorship and propaganda are not substitutes, but rather they are complements. The CCP has adapted quickly to new digital communication technologies, and the CCP's control of Chinese social media is integral to its efforts to shape public beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

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[27] https://www.douyin.com/search/东方卫视?source=search_sug&aid=c5c3b934-7c02-4032-aa5f-f0e80192c72e&enter_from=live_detail.

[28] https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAA3mL2U8Jw1yfB11R6i1fmYslAkmQd_JXD05uIcmmUx1E.

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