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Censorship Can be Counterproductive:

Why Are Certain Kinds of Political Rumors more Credible than Others? An Experiment on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract

Censorship is an organic part of China's efforts to maintain effective governance. Previous studies in political science have investigated the censorship logic and the censorship effectiveness in China. Yet, the consequences of government censorship are far from deciphered. By drawing the connection between government censorship and media credibility, this paper tries to answer the following question: could government censorship be counterproductive by increasing the credibility of political rumors in China? Using a combination of statistical regression models and qualitative interviews, this research studies people's reactions to different types of political rumors in the setting of WeChat, a Chinese social media. I found mixed evidences on the effectiveness of the government censorship in China. On one hand, I found that people tend to believe in a rumor more when they think the information is more likely to be censored. This suggests that government censorship can have a negative effect by increasing the credibility of politically sensitive information which is subject to government censorship. However, the results also suggest that the strategic censorship in China is effective because people tend to believe the official media outlets more than foreign news when it comes to a public crisis in China, even though they understand that the state media is being censored and controlled by the government.

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

To Professor Mary E. Gallagher

To Professor Stuart N. Soroka

To Professor Page E. Scott

To Professor Nahomi Ichino

To Professor Donald Kinder

Contents

Illustrations		vi
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	Hypotheses and Case Selection Rationale	5
Chapter 2	Literature Review	8
Chapter 3	Methodology and Measurement	22
Chapter 4	Data Results and Analysis	34
Chapter 5	Discussion and Future Research	59
Conclusion		67
Acknowledgement		69
Appendix A	Full Regression Results of The First Wave Pilot Sample	70
Appendix B	Full Regression Results of The Second Wave Pilot Sample	81
Appendix C	Full Regression Results and Bayesian Analysis Results of The Survey Experiments	101
Appendix D	Experimental Materials	111
Appendix E	Survey Experiment Questionnaire	118
Appendix F	Interview Questionnaire	127
Bibliography		130

Illustrations

Figures

3.1 The Experimental Design 24

3.2 The Mediation Analysis Model 26

4.1 How censorship likelihood of the information is positively related to media credibility across different experimental groups 38

4.2 Relationship between respondents' support of the current political system controlled by CCP and the perceived information credibility 41

4.3 The Co-relation between Censorship Knowledge, Political Attitude and People's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (without controlling for any other demographic or political characteristics) 45

Tables

4.1 Total Treatment Effects for Different Experimental Groups 36

4.2 Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics 40

4.3 Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics (Substituting the Political Attitude Dimension with the Approval/Disapproval of the CCP governance dimension) 42

4.4 Additive and Interactive Models for Source Treatment Group 43

4.5 Relationship between One's Support of the Current Political System in China and One's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (Excerpt of Additive Regression Models) 46

5.1 Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Controlled Version) 63

5.2 Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Treated Version) 64

A.1 Mediation Results for Source Treatment Group 72

A.2 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group 73

A.3 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group 74

A.4 Mediation Results for Government Treatment Group 75

A.5 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group . . . 76

A.6 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group 77

A.7 Mediation Results for Collective Action Treatment Group 78

A.8 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group . 79

A.9 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group . 80

A.10 Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (with outliers) 83

A.11 Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (outliers removed) 84

A.12 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group (with outliers) 85

A.13 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group (outliers removed) 86

A.14 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group (with outliers) 87

A.15 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group (outliers removed) 88

A.16 Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group (with outliers) 89

A.17 Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group (outliers removed) . . . 90

A.18 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group (with outliers) 91

A.19 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group (outliers removed) 92

A.20 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group (with outliers) 93

A.21 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group (outliers removed) 94

A.22 Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers) . . 95

A.23 Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed) 96

A.24 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers) 97

A.25 Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed) 98

A.26 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers) 99

A.27 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed) 100

A.28 Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (with outliers) 103

A.29 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group 104

A.30 Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group 105

A.31 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group 106

A.32 Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group 107

A.33 Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group . 108

A.34 Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics (Substituting the Political Attitude Dimension with the Approval/Disapproval of the CCP governance dimension) 109

A.35 Additive Interactive Models with Pro/Anti CCP Measurement on the Relationship between One's Support of the Current Political System in China and One's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship 110

Introduction

Political discourse in authoritarian regimes is characterized by three important tools, preference falsification, propaganda, and censorship, through which autocrats manage public grievances and maintain regime stability. The effects of preference falsification are well understood by scholars from both positive and negative perspectives: it reduces ability for society to mobilize collectively, but also makes it more difficult for the dictator to measure public opinions.[1] The effects of propaganda are also well understood from two perspectives: signaling and manipulation. The signaling theory argues that authoritarian regimes use propaganda to demonstrate their strength and capacity to control the political discourse.[2] The manipulation theory, on the other hand, argues that authoritarian regimes use propaganda to persuade credulous citizens and manipulate public supports.[3]

However, theories on government censorship have yet to develop comprehensively. Extant literature on censorship generally focuses on two types of questions: what is the logic behind censoring behaviors and what are the consequences.[4] Neither of these two questions is sufficiently answered, especially the latter. Effects of government censorship are more

1. Timur Kuran, *Private truths, public lies: The social consequences of preference falsification* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Junyan Jiang and Dali L Yang, "Lying or believing? Measuring preference falsification from a political purge in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no. 5 (2016): 600–634; Ronald Wintrobe, "The tinpot and the totalitarian: An economic theory of dictatorship," *American political science review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 849–872.

2. Haifeng Huang and Yao-Yuan Yeh, "Information from Abroad: Foreign Media, Selective Exposure and Political Support in China" [in en], *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (April 2019), doi:10.1017/S0007123416000739.

3. Andrew T. Little, "Propaganda and credulity," *Games and Economic Behavior* 102 (March 2017): 224–232, doi:10.1016/j.geb.2016.12.006; Jidong Chen and Yiqing Xu, "Information manipulation and reform in authoritarian regimes," *Political Science Research and Methods* 5, no. 1 (2017): 163–178.

4. Peter Lorentzen, "China's Strategic Censorship" [in en], *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402–414, doi:10.1111/ajps.12065; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–343.

nebulous than those of propaganda for two reasons: invisibility and ambiguity. Invisibility refers to the "behind the scene" characteristics of censorship. Authoritarian regimes tend to deny the existence of censorship publicly, and journalists revealing censoring behaviors are subject to state violence. Therefore, unlike propaganda, censorship is less observable, regardless of its pervasiveness. Ambiguity refers to the uncertainty of censorship targets. Governments will deliberately create legal ambiguity around off-limit topics, which makes the contents of censorship hard to determine.[5] This ambiguity is aimed at inducing self-censorship among internet users because top-down monitoring is much more costly for the government in the digital age. Ambiguous red lines also prevent people from responding strategically to evade censorship.[6] Consequently, unlike propaganda, which is openly guided by ideologies or political agendas, the objectives of censorship are more difficult to identify.

To further our understanding of the potential effects of government censorship, this paper explores the question from a political communication perspective and tries to answer why certain kinds of political rumor are more credible than others on social media in China. By examining how people respond to WeChat posts containing rumors, my research draws a connection between people's perception of censorship and the perceived credibility of political rumors. By drawing the connection, this paper explores the following puzzle: could government censorship be counter-productive by increasing the credibility of rumors? In fact, recent studies have found that government censorship can unexpectedly increase access to politically sensitive information for citizens.[7] Therefore, whether government censorship

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

6. Ibid.

7. William R. Hobbs and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Sudden Censorship Can Increase Access to Information" [in English], *The American Political Science Review; Washington* 112, no. 3 (August 2018), doi:10.1017/S0003055418000084.

has other hazardous side-effects for authoritarian regimes is worth discussing. Also, this paper will try to find what factors are related to people's sensitivity towards government censorship when using social media.

As the research project has progressed, the research question has evolved. Based on the data collected in pilot research, I've found that the larger environment of political polarization and increasing distrust in media as a whole have complicated the picture. Since the generic media environment can not be neglected when analyzing the empirical results, the research question evolves into the understanding of how state censorship works in an era of political polarization and deterioration of the Sino-U.S. relationship, and what types of political rumors are more credible in the context of both state censorship and media bias. By re-placing the research question in a more up-to-date context, the research displays a better understanding on why state censorship can be effective and counter-productive simultaneously.

The research question has real-world implications since the spread of rumors on social media is becoming a serious problem in China. For instance, last year, Chunying Hua, the Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department, was said to be under party investigation for corruption and secretly obtaining residency in the United States. Citizens interpreted the rumor as a sensitive event subject to government censorship and were inclined to believe the story. Though eventually proved fake, the story triggered a wide-spread suspicion on potential power struggles within the party and discredited the government. Moreover, as the political polarization has become an increasing concern in the field of political communication for both autocracies and democracies, the evolved research

question has further real-world implications in how authoritarian regimes can "guide" the political discussion online by fostering media bias in favor of themselves.

To advance the discussion, this paper will be structured in the following way. First, the main hypothesis will be presented with a case selection rationale. Then, a review of existing theories concerning media credibility and government censorship will be presented. The research methodology and measurement tools will be summarized before analyzing results obtained from pilot data. Furthermore, a specific section will be devoted to improvements and revisions of the research design. Finally, a conclusion will draw on potential implications of this research, as well as proposed future research agendas.

Chapter 1

Hypotheses and Case Selection Rationale

Hypotheses

The primary hypothesis of this paper is: citizens are more likely to believe political rumors which they perceive as more likely to be censored. I argue that similar to their ability to understand government propaganda, citizens learn patterns of government censorship through their daily interactions with the government apparatus.[1] Then, citizens will develop their own evaluations of what contents are classified as sensitive and subject to censorship. Consequently, cues within the information can signal different levels of censorship likelihood. Based on their everyday experiences, citizens may perceive certain kinds of information as more likely to be censored. Since it is impossible for citizens to distinguish government censorship from the deletion of rumors, citizens will regard the censoring behavior as positively related to the information credibility: the government only conceals truth holding the incumbent accountable. Then, citizens may be inclined to believe the story containing cues suggesting higher censorship likelihood as illustrated by the example in the introduction.

Several secondary hypotheses on what affects people's judgement on censorship likelihood are also closely related to the theory proposed: (1) People's understanding of what contents will be classified as sensitive and subject to censorship is positively related to political knowledge. Thus, people with more sophisticated political knowledge and a higher level of education are more likely to identify any piece of sensitive information as subject to censorship. (2) Given any piece of politically sensitive information, people who are more

1. Little, "Propaganda and credulity."

sensitive to government censorship in general are more likely to identify it as subject to censorship. (3) Derived from the previous hypothesis, we can reasonably expect people who hold more liberal political ideologies, which are against government control over freedom of speech, will behave similarly and thus will be more sensitive to government censorship.

Key assumptions underlying these hypotheses are the following: first, citizens possess prior knowledge about censorship patterns and the distribution of prior knowledge is normal among citizens; second, citizens value their perception of censorship likelihood, which means the perception affects their behavior and beliefs; finally, I assume that, though subject to potential limitations, both perceptions are measurable through survey questions.

Case Selection Rationale

China is selected as the case of interest for three reasons. First, China is a single-party authoritarian regime with strong capacity to control its internet, media and civil society. This paper assumes that state capacity is a necessary condition for effective government censorship. Furthermore, China is one of the most studied cases. After King, Pan and Roberts (2013), much research has been conducted to understand censorship in China.[2] This provides a rich basis of existing literature. Finally, China has a large number of internet users and a well-developed internet-based social network.[3] Compared to countries with poor infrastructures and low internet coverage, China provides a better environment for studying the effects of censorship on social media.

2. King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression."

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

Admittedly, China may not represent the general picture for authoritarian states. However, I argue that the study has profound implications as policy spillovers may occur. The establishment of the Great Fire Wall (防火长城), Golden Shield (金盾系统) and China Sky Net (中国天网) provides a rich example of the surveillance technology. Similar to the phenomena observed in national monetary policies, I suggest that China presents a well-established censorship model for other autocrats.[4] Authoritarian regimes with less capacity will learn from the experiences of China once their communication networks become more complicated. Besides a potential for future emulation by other authoritarian regimes, China is also a case worth studying due to its large population and international importance.

Whithin China, this paper focuses on a particular social media, WeChat, due to two different factors. On one hand, the social network on WeChat is clustered and private. Therefore, the interpersonal trust on WeChat is higher than other social media. This implies that rumors on WeChat can cause more severe damage to the government since the information credibility is also endorsed by the sender, usually one's family member or close friend. On the other hand, WeChat has the largest number of users among all social media in China. According to a government report, by December 2018, 87.3% of the social media users in China are using WeChat. This percentage is significantly higher compared to any other social media, even the second most QQ (64.4%), and the third, Weibo (40.9%).[5]

4. Oxana Babecká Kucharčuková, Peter Claeys, and Bořek Vašíček, "Spillover of the ECB's monetary policy outside the euro area: How different is conventional from unconventional policy?," *Journal of Policy Modeling* 38, no. 2 (March 2016): 199–225, doi:10.1016/j.jpolmod.2016.02.002; Dennis Nsafoah and Apostolos Serletis, "International Monetary Policy Spillovers" [in en], *Open Economies Review* 30, no. 1 (February 2019): 87–104, doi:10.1007/s11079-018-9505-0.

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

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Political communication is a field related to journalism, democratic accountability and public discourse. Within democratic regimes, the study of political communication usually focuses on campaign effects or channeling effects.[1] Both effects involve the process of providing receivers with political information. People learn political information mainly from three channels: direct experience, domestic news from independent agencies and foreign media outlets.[2] The quality of the message, how credible and informative it is, will significantly affect the political knowledge gained by citizens. Therefore, media credibility is an important factor in political communication: if people don't believe in the message, they will not experience an attitude shift and thus will not react accordingly.[3] Three factors have been found to affect media credibility: source, medium and message.[4]

Medium Credibility

Theories on medium credibility are perhaps the most historical ones. The technological determinism proposed by Marshall McLuhan provides the foundation of theories in this field. McLuhan asserts that the way we live is a function of how we process the infor-

1. Shanto Iyengar and Adam F. Simon, "New Perspectives and Evidence on Political Communication and Campaign Effects," *Annual Review of Psychology* 51, no. 1 (2000): 149–169, doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.149.

2. Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (New York, UNITED STATES: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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

4. Miriam J. Metzger et al., "Credibility for the 21st Century: Integrating Perspectives on Source, Message, and Media Credibility in the Contemporary Media Environment," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 27, no. 1 (January 2003): 293–335, doi:10.1080/23808985.2003.11679029.

mation, and the technology is an extension of our body organs.[5] The change in medium is the same as the change in our body. Thus, medium can affect media credibility by shaping one's perception, understanding and reaction based on the information he or she received. However, technological determinism is not robust as people choose over whether to adopt the new technology or not.

Another major school of theories concerning medium credibility is media dependency. Gaziano and McGrath (1985) point out that people regard a certain type of medium as more credible than others when they are exposed to the medium more.[6] The media dependence theory is becoming more important in the digital era since people are now heavily relying on the internet for all kinds of information. Dutton and Shepherd (2006) argue that people's trust in internet as a medium is actually a generalization of their trust in multiple online sources based on user experiences.[7] Consequently, the more frequent exposure to a certain kind of medium can increase the medium credibility through an accumulation of user experience. Besides the medium dependency, the social-economic status, mobility and level education may also affect people's trust in different forms of medium.[8]

Though all these theories can be applied to the study of social media, some distinct features of social media also bring new factors affecting medium credibility to scholars' atten-

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

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

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

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

tion. A recent theory on medium credibility concludes that interactivity is positively related to media credibility.[9] Here, interactivity refers to the psychological factors characterizing the likelihood of receivers' engagement in social interactions with others.[10] This theory is important for the study of social media because the interaction between the receivers and the agencies are limited in traditional forms of mass communication. However, it is easy to interact with agents on social media and the sense of participation begin to influence people's perception about media credibility.

Nevertheless, the medium credibility is of less concern for my research because the research question is based on a single, frequently used social media in China. Yet, the theories around still give a context of the study: Since WeChat is a frequently used social media and should enjoy a high level of medium credibility according to the mere exposure theory, a rumor spreading on WeChat will cause significant harm to the government if found credible.

Source Credibility

Theories on source credibility traditionally focus on the reputation of news agencies or established institutions. According to Metzger et al. (2003), a source is credible if people regard the agencies providing the information as reputable in both trustworthiness and expertise.[11] Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye (1998) conclude that media credibility

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

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

11. Metzger et al., "Credibility for the 21st Century."

could be positively affected by how much people regard the message as fair and in-depth, which depends on how the information is presented.[12]

However, the situation changes dramatically in the digital age as news sources are no longer institutions: individuals can become influencial sources on social media as well. Personal reputation may thus contribute more to source credibility than institutional reputation. Cosenza Rickman et al. (2015) state that an online blog is qualitatively different from traditional sources because people are more likely to associate the concept of source with a specific individual instead of a group of professionals. Recipients would consider attributes associated with personal information to judge the credibility of source, including Blogger's expertise and offline identity disclosure, blogger's trustworthiness and value system, information quality, and appeals and triggers of a personal nature.[13] This provides an important theoretical background: individual media outlets on social media can also establish reputation and become a credible source for other users.

Another perspective of theories on source credibility focuses on how funding affects media ideology and information quality. Soroka et al. (2013) conclude that public broadcasts generally do better in providing accurate and unbiased political information compared to privately-funded broadcasts.[14] The conclusion holds for democratic regimes as public broadcasts are less influenced by capital. However, the conclusion becomes ambiguous in

12. Thomas J. Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye, "Cruising is believing? Comparing internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly; Thousand Oaks* 75, no. 2 (1998): 325–340.

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

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

authoritarian regimes and in the age of political polarization because the government now has a stronger motivation to manipulate the public broadcasting in favor of the government.

The political elites in the United States now often discredit traditional news agencies online in order to serve their political ends.[15] A recent example would be how President Donald Trump used the "fake news" label to attack the news agencies criticizing his policies and political opinions in order to discredit the media agencies as a whole.[16] This increasing trend of general distrust in certain media sources fueled by the negative information from political elites is worrisome because it strengthens the perception of source credibility based on partisanship. People with more polarized political attitudes are found more likely to differentiate the credibility of news sources based on their political preferences.[17] Such judgement of credibility based on partisanship is more of a emotional response than a logical response. Consequently, disconforming evidence can hardly serve the purpose of "fact check" and may only help to correct the misinterpretation on source credibility temporarily at the very best.[18]

While most research done in the area focuses on how domestic political partisanship affects the quality of democracies, this research sheds light on how this may work in an international context for autocrats. The relationship between political partisanship and source credibility provides the authoritarian regimes a new way to conduct government censorship by discrediting news sources that tend to criticize them. For instance, the Chinese

15. Jonathan M Ladd, *Why Americans hate the news media and how it matters* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

16. Jana Laura Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler, "Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 43, no. 2 (2019): 97–116.

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

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

government has long been categorizing news sources like *CNN* and *New York Times* as "anti-China" or "discriminatory" in order to lower their credibility.

Message Credibility

The keystone theory on message credibility is that people focus on informational cues. The informational cues include keywords signaling ideology and emotion, or characteristics of a webpage interface. A logical and official style of narration can significantly increase the credibility of the message.[19] An cue signaling professionalism in the message can also increase the credibility of that message.[20]

Message credibility also matters in terms of affecting people's emotions using narrative tactics to persuade receivers. An established theory related to this would be sensationalism. According to Igartua and Cheng (2009), people's fascination about information with strong emotions is a socio-cognitive effect and has little to do with the underlying realities on which the stories are written.[21] This provides an important insight for the study of political rumors: political rumors can use sensational cues to arouse affective responses from the receivers and improve its credibility independent of the fabricated stories.

My research adds a new dimension to the understanding of message credibility: Do government interventions on social media, state censorship in particular, interact with message cues and thus changing the credibility of information? This is different from the tradi-

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

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

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

tional way of thinking about information cues because I'm not investigating how cues can operate independently with the information, but how cues may interact with a larger media environment and thus produce interesting outcomes.

Political Communication

The concept of media credibility has been widely studied. However, the works mentioned above by no means provide a comprehensive understanding of media credibility for two reasons: first, most studies on media credibility tends to focus on the effects caused by information itself, while neglecting changes caused by external environments; second, most works are interested in the function of media within democratic regimes but hardly study the case related to authoritarian regimes. So, why are these two questions important?

The answer is straight forward: political communication is naturally subject to the influence of political interests and a change in the external political environment can cast changes on the communication process. Aggarwal (1989) directly expresses that the vulnerability of press in India is due to its relationship with the government.[22] The problem is worse in authoritarian regimes where the freedom of expression is violently suppressed. By the report of Human Rights Watch, the Chinese government used plainclothes officers to harass or detain foreign journalists before the 2008 Olympic Games and forced them to abide by government regulations.[23] Therefore, the external political environment can affect the process of communication significantly. Potentially, due to a stronger political intervention within authoritarian regimes on media, the influence caused by political incentives on

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

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

media credibility could be more significant than that in democratic regimes. My research will help to build the bridge between the two important fields of study.

Government Censorship and Dictators' Dilemma

Government censorship is a critical form of political intervention in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, censorship has been the cornerstone of state governance in China ever since its dynastic era. The effects of censorship in modern China are understood from both domestic and international perspectives.

The literature on domestic political effects of censorship usually focus on the limitation of press freedom through party regulation and use of violence. Tian (2018) points out that the Xi administration has tightened its control over the media and established a "seven No" (七不讲) regulation on media contents in order to promote the party wills (Tian 2018).[24] This regulation limits the contents that could be legally discussed on media and within universities. Within Hassid (2016), several articles also concluded that the censorship imposed on journalism within China by the central government had limited journalists' ability to tell the truth, regardless of the efforts paid by journalists to fight back against such censorship.[25]

The international political implications are related to global corporations. According to the hearing conducted by the United States Congress in 2012, the censorship in China not only limited the freedom of its citizens, but also caused a concern about whether international

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

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

corporations should be responsible for the usage of technologies they sold to governments.[26] A lot of advanced technologies today, such as facial identification, data mining and personal algorithms, all have the potential to be used as surveillance tools within authoritarian countries. Such extraction, commodification, and control over personal information through advanced technologies are part of a larger phenomenon—surveillance capitalism.[27]

Both domestic and international effects of censorship are related to the process of communication. On one hand, the limitation on freedom of expression prevents the spread of certain kinds of information, usually those endangering the legitimacy of state. Consequently, the content of communication is affected. On the other hand, the share of technologies with potential for surveillance across the national border has strengthened the government ability to monitor its citizens. The strengthened monitoring ability will encourage individuals and organizations to self-sensor and avoid criticizing the government. Consequently, the sources of the information are co-opted and become less trustworthy. As mentioned above, research proves that media credibility is strongly related to the credibility of message and source. If censorship affects both the message content and the source, then it is reasonable to expect that the censorship will affect media credibility as an external factor.

Another important reason for why censorship affects communication process is the dictator's dilemma. While the state is eager to know the citizens' true preferences, the repression apparatus tends to increase preference falsification and grievances among the

26. United States. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *China's censorship of the Internet and social media: the human toll and trade impact : hearing before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, first session, November 17, 2011.*

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

citizens.[28] Thus, it would be difficult for the authoritarian regimes to figure out the true preferences, usually the true level of discontent, among its citizens. The associated problem with the dictator's dilemma in terms of the use of state censorship is that the autocrats can have conflicting goals. To correctly understand the citizens' attitudes about the government, the autocrats want the information exchange to be free and transparent; however, to conceal state violence, poor performance or other illegitimate practices of the government, autocrats want to control the information exchange by conducting censorship.[29] The contradicting goals make the implications of censorship on communication process ambiguous. Whether the government is able to effectively convince citizens on controversial issues is doubtful since there exists an information disparity between the government and the citizens about sensitive topics.[30] A good example would be environmental protection. When the government was trying to establish environmental protection institutions, citizens doubted the effectiveness and government's actual intentions because citizens believed the corruption and low law enforcement rate were concealed.[31] As the communication is not completely free due to government censorship, it would be hard for the government to convince its citizens that the "whole truth" is told. Since the political credibility largely relies on the how much citizens trust the public government discourse in a single-party regime, the dictator's dilemma on

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

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

30. Zheng Su and Tianguang Meng, "Selective responsiveness: Online public demands and government responsiveness in authoritarian China," *Social Science Research*, Special issue on Big Data in the Social Sciences, 59 (September 2016): 52–67.

31. Guizhen He, Arthur P. J. Mol, and Yonglong Lu, "Trust and Credibility in Governing China's Risk Society," *Environmental Science & Technology* 46, no. 14 (July 2012): 7442–7443, doi:10.1021/es302429e.

whether to tighten or loosen media control poses a significant problem to the legitimacy of autocrats.[32]

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

Government Censorship and Media Credibility

First, the studies conducted on censorship, officially stated as public opinion management (輿情管理) in China, directly imply that the final goal of the management is to convince people about the official narration. Xiong (2016) points out that "to cope with public opinion in the digital era, the mainstream media should react quickly when there is a negative incident and the social media should help to promote positive attitudes among citizens by spreading official narrations on the events."[33] (direct quote: "主流媒体应快速反应，积极主动的通过公正的权威的新闻报道、分析和评论来疏导公众情绪") Therefore, at the core of this public opinion management strategy is persuasion and believability, which are tightly related to the concept of media credibility. The government wants to use credible

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

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

narration to shape and guide online discussion away from undesirable directions. Another way to interpret the pursuit of credibility by the Chinese government is from a mere exposure perspective. The government tries hard to promote pro-regime information by conducting censorship on opposing ideas and controlling the majority of voices online. A control of the majority of opinions will have a mere exposure effect to increase the credibility of official narratives by presenting internet users with only pro-government information.

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

Moreover, citizens' perception of the media censorship would alter their understanding of politically sensitive information. Huang (2017) points out that the credibility of rebuttals to political rumors in authoritarian regimes differs significantly in credibility according to the source: whether it's official, quasi-official or non-official.[36] Due to the existence of censorship, people tend to believe not officially related sources when it comes to the discussion on politically sensitive topics. This is contrary to the story of public broadcasts in democratic regimes shown by Soroka et al. (2013). Stockman and Gallagher's argument about media

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

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

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

credibility also finds that people are generally more persuaded by news from semi-official sources, especially if they are written in a realistic way (not written like a propaganda). So they argue that often in China, the content between official and semi-official news is not that different, but the presentation is different.[37]

Finally, citizens have natural intention to search for more credible information on sensitive issues and their searching behavior could hardly be deterred by government censorship. Roberts (2018) argues that the practice of censorship would trigger users to talk more about the politically sensitive topics during the days after their online posts are deleted.[38] Hobbs and Roberts (2018) also argues that the ban on foreign social media use, such as the use of Snapchat, can increase citizens' access to sensitive information as people are motivated by the new censorship to seek out avenues for evasion.[39] The authors argue that citizens prefer preserving their media consumption pattern to complying with the government censorship. Then, after citizens find a way to evade censorship, they would naturally consume and search for information previously censored by the government.[40] An increased exposure to foreign sources and sensitive information ruled out by the government can erode citizens' trust in the incumbent and further discredit certain kinds of information.[41] Consequently, the existence of censorship may affect media credibility by altering people's perception on different kinds of sources and contents.

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

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

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

40. Ibid.

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

My research is trying to further understand how government censorship may help increase or decrease the credibility of information by shaping citizens' daily media consumption behaviors or political attitudes. It's an informative extension of the previous research in this field because it reflects how citizens react to government censorship when they encounter rumors that can hardly be proved or falsified immediately. It may also helps us to better understand why government censorship can have mixed effects for the authoritarian regimes in the field of political communication.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Measurement

Methodology

The research adopts a mixed methodology consisting of within-subject survey experiments and semi-structured interviews. The additive and interactive statistical regression models applied to the quantitative data enable us to identify the working mechanism of the hypothesized treatment effects.[1] The mixed methodology is adopted because the variable in interest, perceived censorship likelihood, is the mediator and can not be randomly assigned during the experiments. The lack of randomization may introduce confounding variables which are not considered in the main regression model. Therefore, qualitative data is used to justify whether the mediator can be viewed as a plausible explanation to the result.

The Survey Experiment

This paper adopts a within-subject experimental design and each participant is exposed to two pieces of information: one controlled version and one treated version. While the main concern of within-subject designs is that the order of materials may affect outcomes, I argue that the ordering issue can be alleviated by randomizing the order in which the materials are presented. Also, it is possible that the second piece of information will gain more credibility due to mere exposure.[2] However, I argue that two pieces of information do not represent a great enough sample to trigger the mere exposure effect.

1. Alan S Gerber and Donald P Green, *Field experiments: Design, analysis, and interpretation* (WW Norton, 2012).

2. Ian M. Handley, "Source mere exposure and persuasion" [in English] (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2003).

Sample and Experiment Instrument The sample is recruited in mainland China. Participants are required to have proficiency in comprehending simplified Chinese and previous experiences with WeChat. An ideal sample would be random and recruited from average cities within China, covering a wide range of demographic distributions.[3] However, to recruit an ideal sample is practically difficult. Government censorship is a sensitive topic, and the research agenda may be intervened if a massive recruitment is conducted on field. One common alternative is to use online samples. Therefore, the targeted sample population is restricted to volunteers among internet users aged between 18 and 55. This sample population is justifiable as the government report shows over 70% of all *netizens* in China are aged between 18 and 55, and a person has to be over 16 before he or she is fully responsible for spreading political rumors online.[4] Thus, though subject to certain limitations, such as the voluntary response biases and disproportional regional representations, this sample population is easier to target and has a potential for generalization.

The survey experiments are distributed by Qualtrics to protect the respondents' personal identities. Though the online survey distributors are found to have a biased sample towards more educated respondents, this is an acceptable drawback due to practical concerns.[5] Also, theoretically, citizens with higher education will be more sensitive to censorship, yet less susceptible to rumors. Therefore, a sample population with higher education is biasing against the hypotheses and will not pose severe problems to causal inferences.

3. Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control."

4. CNNIC, *The 43rd China Statistical Report on Internet Development*.

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

Treatments The survey experiment consists of three independent experiments each with a different treatment, but share the same control. Treatments are formed around factors that may influence the perceived level of censorship likelihood. However, we can not ask people about what they think is likely to be censored before the experiment because prior exposure may distort the experiment results. Consequently, I constructed treatments based on two articles investigating how the Chinese government identify the risk of public opinion crisis and practice government censorship.[6]

In the first experiment, the source is treated by distinguishing whether it is subject to censorship (T_1). I regard sources within mainland China as subject to censorship ($Z = 1$) and foreign sources as not ($Z = 0$). In the second experiment, the information is treated according to whether it involves speculation on government officials (T_2). $Z = 1$ if the speculation exists and $Z = 0$ if not. In the third experiment, the information is treated according to whether it involves a collective action potential (T_3). $Z = 1$ if there exists and $Z = 0$ if not. All treatments are represented as explicit cues in the information constructed.

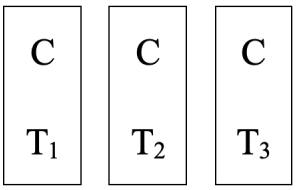

Figure 3.1: The Experimental Design

Experimental Materials All materials are manually constructed to ensure that the only difference between the two pieces of information presented to the respondent is the

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

presence of intended treatments. However, the carefully managed messages are at the risk of the generalization of results. In order to acquire external validity, I draw a parallel between the information constructed and the rumors actually spread on social media in China. The parallel means that at least one version of the actual rumor on the public event identified should contain cues identical to the treatments proposed: mentioning a foreign source of information, criticizing a government official, or calling for collective action. Then, the public event is determined by the following criteria: (1) It is political and has a potential to hold the government accountable. (2) It happens after 2012 and is possible to be spread under Xi Jinping administration. (3) It satisfies the "parallel" potential described above.

The incident selected is the vaccine scandal of Changchun *Changsheng Bio-Technology* in July, 2018. The 2018 vaccine scandal was political, as it was a public health emergency, and the government was blamed for weak regulations. Also, it happened recently. Finally, it satisfied the "parallel" conditions: (1) Both domestic and foreign media had covered the issue, which gave room to rumors mentioning foreign sources for information;[7] (2) Rumors around the incident also speculated there was government corruption related to former general party secretary Jiang Zemin;[8] (3) Protests had been called against government after the incident.[9] Therefore, the 2018 vaccine scandal fits all the criteria listed. While all experimental materials are included in the appendix, they can be summarized as the following:

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

7. See https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-44920324 and http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-07/27/c_1123187880.htm

8. See https://theinitium.com/article/20180722-mainland-king-of-the-vaccine/

9. See https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/huanjing/ql1-07262018092049.html

- Treatment Group on Source: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Lianhe Zaobao*, a foreign news media located in Singapore.
- Treatment Group on Government Criticism: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Xinhua News*, and a speculation on government corruption related to government officials in Beijing.
- Treatment Group on Collective Action: A parody vaccine crisis happened in Beijing, reported by *Xinhua News*, and a call for collective action.

Analysis Model and Limitations The causal inference proposed by the hypothesis can be partly represented by the following diagram: Z refers to the treatments received by individuals, M refers to the perceived likelihood of government censorship held by individuals, and Y refers to the perceived media credibility evaluated by individuals.

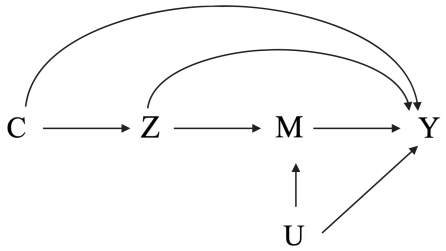

Figure 3.2: The Mediation Analysis Model

Yet, instead of using a traditional 4-step constant effect mediation model to assess the mechanism, I utilize the sufficient interaction model to analyze the effects.[10] Fitting to an additive statistical regression, the condition for sufficient cause synergism under monotonicity

10. Reuben M. Baron and David A. Kenny, "The moderator–mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, no. 6 (December 1986), doi:10.1037/0022-3514.51.6.1173; Lawrence R. James and Jeanne M. Brett, "Mediators, moderators, and tests for mediation," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 69, no. 2 (May 1984): 307–321, doi:10.1037/0021-9010.69.2.307; Charles M. Judd and David A. Kenny, "Process Analysis: Estimating Mediation in Treatment Evaluations" [in en], *Evaluation Review* 5, no. 5 (October 1981): 602–619, doi:10.1177/0193841X8100500502.

can be summarized as $\alpha_3 > 0$.[11]

$$\mathbb{P}(Y = 1 \mid G = g, E = e) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 g + \alpha_2 e + \alpha_3 eg$$

The interaction model trumps the mediation model in two ways. On one hand, the mediation model mostly focus on *how* the mechanism work while the interaction model also provides insights into *whom* and *by how much* do the mechanisms affect.[12] One main drawbacks of the constant effect mediation model is that the causal inference allows no mediator-exposure interaction, which can hardly be sustained. In the study, different groups of people may react differently to the information merely due to whether they are familiar with and sensitive to the presence of the government censorship. This represents an interaction between the exposure and the mediator. On the other hand, the constant mediation model is found difficult to be clearly addressed by pure statistical inferences, while the conditions of the statistical inference for an interaction model is established as above.

Nevertheless, the sufficient interaction model still experiences the criticism of insufficient causal inferences as all other linear regression models. Two main limitations are the existence of mere associations and the absence of other potential interactive variables.[13] To address the drawbacks, this paper adopts the following methods. First, I include potential confounding variables u, such as political ideologies and general attitudes towards government censorship, in the measurement and test whether the treatment effect holds

11. Tyler J. VanderWeele, *Explanation in causal inference : methods for mediation and interaction* [in English], xvi, 705 pages (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

12. Ibid.

13. Michael Shalev, "Limits and alternatives to multiple regression in comparative research," *Comparative Social Research* 24, no. 3 (2007): 261–308.

after controlling for these co-variates. Second, several free responses are included in the survey experiment to qualitatively assess what affects respondents' judgments on censorship likelihood and media credibility.[14] Finally, qualitative interviews and behavioral indicators are used to strengthen the arguments on causality and interactive effects. The behavioral indicators are of two kinds: the intention to use VPN or incentives to screenshot the information. Both behaviors are in response to government censorship instead of media credibility. Thus, observation of these behaviors can strengthen the possibility that the shift in perceived media credibility is caused by the hypothesized mechanism.

Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured interviews are conducted by a snowball sampling in the United States among Chinese students and scholars who are exposed to government censorship in China previously. The main focus of these semi-structured interviews are the following: whether the interviewees think there is any differences between the pieces of information they see on social media and the differences will lead to a varied probability of being censored; whether the interviewees find the pieces of information credible and why; whether the censorship likelihood serves as a factor for interviewees to determine the credibility of information online in their daily lives. I'm also interested in how interviewees understand the concept of government censorship and how well they understand the censorship practices in mainland China. Since the sample collected is not random, it will not be representative in terms of constructing a causal inference solely from the interview data.[15] Therefore, the qualitative interview data are much more useful when they are used to support or explain the

14. VanderWeele, *Explanation in causal inference : methods for mediation and interaction*.

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

empirical regularity identified by the survey experiment in this study. As will be shown in the discussion of pilot results, the qualitative data is critical in explaining both the empirical regularities, and anomalous patterns, in the data collected.

Measurement

To examine the hypothesis proposed, this paper measures three important concepts besides demographic variables: the political characteristics, perceived media credibility and perceived likelihood of censorship. The survey questionnaire is attached at the end of this paper as an appendix for reference.

Political Characteristics

The political characteristics measures the respondent's political ideology, political knowledge and general attitude towards government censorship. The political ideology and political knowledge attributes are used to distinguish two kinds of respondents: politically sensitive and politically non-sensitive users.[16] The general attitude towards government censorship is measured separately because a person may regard a certain piece of information as subject to censorship while is not sensitive to the existence of government censorship in general.

The survey questions examining political ideology are chosen from the questionnaire used by Huang (2017) and Pan and Xu (2018). The questions cover political, economic and social issues.[17] The survey questions on political knowledge follow the model set by Huang

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

17. Huang, "A War of (Mis)Information: The Political Effects of Rumors and Rumor Rebuttals in an Authoritarian Country"; Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, "China's ideological spectrum," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 254–273.

(2015), asking participants multiple choice questions about domestic political issues such as the name of the president.[18] Four questions examining the respondents' common knowledge are asked and the dummy variable is recorded as binary: 1 for answering all four questions correctly and 0 otherwise.

The survey questions on censorship knowledge is developed by the author and the main focus is to test how well the respondents understand the government practices of censorship in China. Respondents' political ideology and censorship knowledge are treated as continuous variables ranging form 1 to 7, where higher score denotes more liberal ideology and more sophisticated understanding, and respondents' political knowledge is treated as a binary variable taking values 1 for answering all four questions correct or 0 otherwise.

Survey questions on general attitude towards government censorship measures two dimensions: awareness and opinion. The awareness dimension evaluates whether respondents are aware of government censorship. For instance, whether the respondent believe the government censorship exists in China or the government censorship is conducted frequently. The opinion dimension evaluates whether the respondents regard the media environment in China as dissatisfying or think the existence of government censorship is improper. The general attitude towards government censorship is a continuous variable ranging form 1 to 7, where a higher score means the respondent is more sensitive to, and and averse to, the government censorship in general.

Survey questions on self-censoring intentions and media bias evaluate the media consumption habits of the respondents. The question on self-censoring put emphasis on whether the respondent has an intention to withhold politically sensitive opinions in online discussion

18. Haifeng Huang, "Propaganda as Signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–437.

or fade away from controversial topics. The media bias questions try to understand whether the respondent tend to regard the online information sphere as biased and whether all online news criticizing China is biased. Both variables are treated as continuous variables ranging from 1 to 7, where a higher score means the respondent is having a higher intention to do so.

Perceived Media Credibility

Perceived media credibility is evaluated on three dimensions: medium, source, and message. The survey questions evaluate the three dimensions separately on a 7-point scale where a higher score means the information is more credible. The general media credibility is then calculated as an average over all three dimensions.

Source Credibility Source credibility is evaluated by the following attributes: goodwill, trustworthiness, and expertise. "Goodwill" is selected from McCroskey (2009) and is defined as whether the respondent finds the source caring.[19] "Trustworthiness" and "Expertise" are adopted from Metzger et al. (2003). "Trustworthiness" captures the exogenous trust assigned to each source regardless of the message and "Expertise" captures the professionalism of the source.[20] The scales of measurement are excerpted from McCroskey (2009) and Metzger et al. (2003) with minor revisions.

19. James C. McCroskey and Jason J. Teven, "Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement," *Communication Monographs* 66, no. 1 (March 1999): 90–103, doi:10.1080/03637759909376464.

20. Metzger et al., "Credibility for the 21st Century."

Medium Credibility Medium credibility is evaluated by the following attributes: trustworthiness and perceived professionalism, both adopted from Lucassen and Schraagen (2012).[21] "Trustworthiness" captures whether respondents trust WeChat as a platform for communication and "Perceived professionalism" explores whether respondents use WeChat as a platform to find professional opinions. A free response question on why respondents choose WeChat as an information source is also included in the section to avoid the systematic bias caused by medium dependency.

Message Credibility Message credibility is evaluated by the following attributes: accuracy, authenticity and believability. Appelman and Sundar (2016) summarized these three *reflective indicators* as characterizing the message credibility and developed measurement instruments around these indicators. Intuitively, the questions are measuring whether the the respondents think the message is "accurate", "authentic", and "believable." towards the attributes.

Perceived Censorship Likelihood

Perceived likelihood of censorship characterizes how likely receivers think the piece of information presented is to be censored. Different from the general attitude towards government censorship, the survey questions on perceived censorship likelihood refer to the specific pieces of information presented in the experiment. In other words, this dimension captures how sensitive the respondent is to the government censorship given a certain piece of information. Given any piece of information, respondents who are more sensitive towards the

21. Teun Lucassen and Jan Maarten Schraagen, "Propensity to trust and the influence of source and medium cues in credibility evaluation" [in en], *Journal of Information Science* 38, no. 6 (December 2012): 566–577, doi:10.1177/0165551512459921.

government censorship are more likely to be extra cautious and thus rate the information as more likely to be censored compared to those respondents who are apathy to the censorship.

Questions are of two types: direct statements and behavior indicators. Direct statements asks respondents whether they think the information will be deleted by the government straightforwardly. Behavior indicators, as mentioned previously, aim to capture behaviors only associated with government censorship but not media credibility. All survey questions are evaluated on a 7-point scale and a higher score represents a higher perceived censorship likelihood. Also, qualitative responses are required for two important behavioral indicators: whether the respondents feel safe to share the content and whether they would like to take a screenshot of the information. The responses serve as qualitative data to justify whether the behavior indicators are actually measuring the perceived censorship likelihood of the information.

Chapter 4

Data Results and Analysis

Overview on Quantitative Results

Instead of directly supporting or refuting the hypotheses, the data illustrates a more complicated picture, signaling both positive and negative effects of government censorship. Government censorship is found effective because it prevents citizens from believing rumors of China mentioning a foreign news source when it comes to the public health incident. However, government censorship is also found counter-productive because citizens who are more aware of, and have better understanding about, government censorship are more likely to believe in rumors which they perceived as likely to be censored.

The direct treatment effect is only found in one of the three experimental groups, while the co-variates all behave similarly across the experiments. In terms of the direct treatment effects, the respondents are found more inclined to believe official media outlets compared to foreign news on public health incidents, and to be indifferent to cues suggesting government criticisms and collective action potentials. In terms of the relationships between the co-variates, respondents' knowledge and prior perception of government censorship, intention to self-censor and evaluation of the media bias are found to affect their judgements concerning media credibility. Respondents' knowledge of government censorship and their political attitudes are found to affect their sensitivity towards the government censorship.

Analysis of Quantitative Results

Sample Characteristics

The survey experiments were administrated online in mainland China. For each experimental group, 210 samples were collected across the nation. Admittedly, the sample is not nationally representative and skewed towards highly educated citizens.[1] Yet, the results are still informative because the samples are drawn from all 34 provinces and cover a wide age range. Also, the samples cover citizens from various political backgrounds, such as party members and state-owned companies employees, which may affect the results.

Results of the Additive Regression Model on Media Credibility

The direct treatment effect is only found in the experimental group alternating the source and the result suggests that respondents find information on public health incidents reported by *Xinhua*, which is the party official media outlet, more credible even though the information is censored. The results remain the same after controlling for demographic variables and related co-variates, and a full regression table can be found in the appendix. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that on average, citizens in China online are less likely to believe the foreign news reporting public emergencies in China, even if the contents are the same.

The negative treatment effect found in the experimental group alternating the news source suggests the effectiveness of government censorship from two perspectives. On one hand, the citizens are prevented from believing the foreign news, which is not censored and potentially provides more details hidden by the Chinese government, in the first place. On

1. Li, Shi, and Zhu, "The face of internet recruitment: Evaluating the labor markets of online crowdsourcing platforms in China."

Table 4.1: Total Treatment Effects for Different Experimental Groups

	Dependent variable:		
	Credibility		
	Source	Government	Collective Action
Treatment	−0.395***	0.003	−0.040
	(0.092)	(0.087)	(0.084)
Constant	5.245***	5.178***	5.131***
	(0.065)	(0.062)	(0.060)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.042	0.00000	0.001
Adjusted R^2	0.039	-0.002	-0.002
Residual Std. Error (df = 418)	0.947	0.894	0.864
F Statistic (df = 1; 418)	18.207***	0.001	0.229
Note: see A.28, A.30, and A.32			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

the other hand, this tendency of a distrust in foreign media can further narrow the alternative explanations citizens can obtain about politically controversial issues: such as the protection of human rights or the protests in Hong Kong. By ruling out the potential alternatives, the party is more likely to succeed its goal of "public opinion guidance" by providing an official narrative and controlling the right to speak (话语权).

On the other hand, clues suggesting the corruption of government officials and calling for collective actions don't have a significant impact on the credibility of the rumor, which is counter intuitive, because usually information containing more details is regarded as more credible. In the open ended question incorporated into the survey experiments, respondents would write responses suggesting that they won't spread or trust the rumors on government corruption until it's published via the official media outlet. This may also suggest the effectiveness of the government censorship in two different ways: one possibility is that

government censorship prevents citizens to believe in scandals of the government until the incumbent confirms it; while the other possibility is that the citizens will self-censor because they understand spreading such information against the government may have legal ramifications. Equivalently, the government would successfully hide the scandals if they choose to do it. However, it is still not clear why there is a lack of total treatment effect in the two experimental groups if we only look at the quantitative experimental results.

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

However, it would be improper to conclude that government censorship in China is working without any flaws. In all three experimental groups, the censorship likelihood of the information is found to be positively related to the credibility of the information. While 4.1 illustrates the relationship between the variables without controlling any co-variates, the regression results with controlled variables give a consistent result as well. Another interesting pattern we can observe from the figure is that the data point concentrated in

the upper triangle according to the 45-degree line. This suggests that the scale of variation in response to media credibility largely depends on the censorship likelihood: the variation in credibility measurement decreases as the censorship likelihood increases. Therefore, it's possible that there is an interaction between the treatment and whether respondents regard the information as highly likely to be censored. Also, it's worth noting that the pattern is consistent across all three groups even if total treatment effects are not found in the experimental groups other than the one on alternating the source. In the following sections, I will examine whether the censorship likelihood has an interaction effect on the outcome in the model and what explains the steady pattern across the experimental groups even when no treatment effect is found.

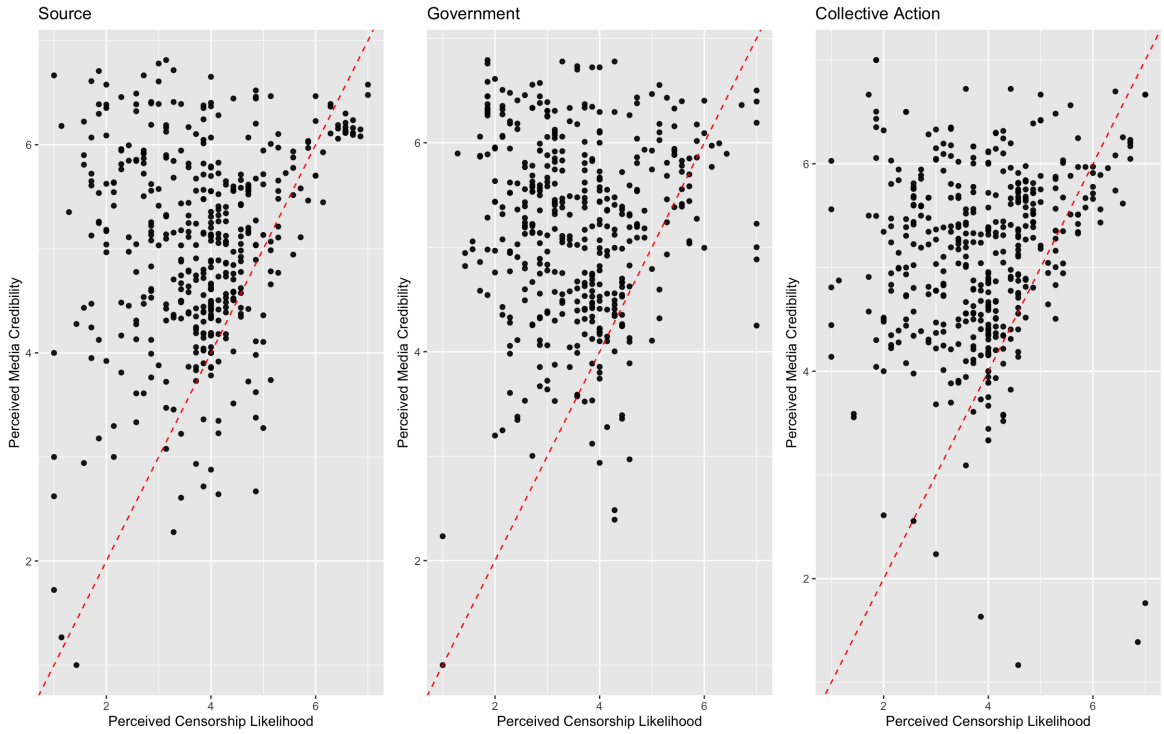

Figure 4.1: How censorship likelihood of the information is positively related to media credibility across different experimental groups

Another variable behaves consistently throughout the experimental groups, after controlled for demographics and political attitudes, is respondents' knowledge of government censorship prior to the experiment. If respondents are more sophisticated in terms of understanding government censorship (e.g. who conducts the actual deletion online, what kinds of materials are subject to censorship, etc.), then they are more likely to believe in rumors spreading online. Although no clear causal inferences could be made on the variable given the limitation of the statistical model used, the mere association result is still valuable in demonstrating the fact that different groups of citizens may react differently to the same political rumor. In fact, in the next section, the interactive regression model gives a positive result on whether respondents' knowledge has interactive effects on the exposure.

Besides how well the respondents understand the government censorship, three other characteristics are also found to be related to respondents' judgements on the credibility of the rumor. Although these variables are not of interest for this experiment, the results are still worth noting because they allow us to peek into how personal characteristics can complicate the picture when discussing media credibility in an authoritarian regime. First of all, respondents' general perception on government censorship will have an effect on how they view the online information. If respondents are more aware of the existence of government censorship in general (e.g. they regard the media environment in China as not free and censored), then they are less likely to believe in the information online. Similarly, if respondents regard the information online as biased in general, then they are less likely to believe it. Finally, if respondents show a higher intention in self-censoring, then they are more likely to believe in rumors online, even if they are not likely to spread the information themselves as suggested by their qualitative responses. These results suggest how the general distrust of

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

Table 4.2: Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics

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

Note:results of other variables neglected *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

While the distrust in media in democracies is largely related to partisanship and polarization, the results found in China, an authoritarian regime, are less related to political ideology.[2] Since the political attitude measurement in this paper is adopted from Pan and Xu (2018), measuring the liberal ideology from political, social, and economic perspectives, the results suggests that partisanship of left and right would matter little in China when

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

discussing media credibility.[3] A potential explanation to this phenomenon is the potential difference in what "partisianship" means in different countries. Since there doesn't exist a regular shift of power induced by citizens in authoritarian regimes, the political debates are less likely to be motivated by liberal or conservative ideologies. Instead, the partisanship in China is more centralized around the approval and disapproval of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, I tested the relationship between respondents' satisfaction of the current political system in China and the perceived media credibility. As summarized by figure 4.2, the results remain the same and no clear patterns could be found. The coefficients are also not significant in an additive regression model. Consequently, the political partisanship is not likely to affect media credibility in China.

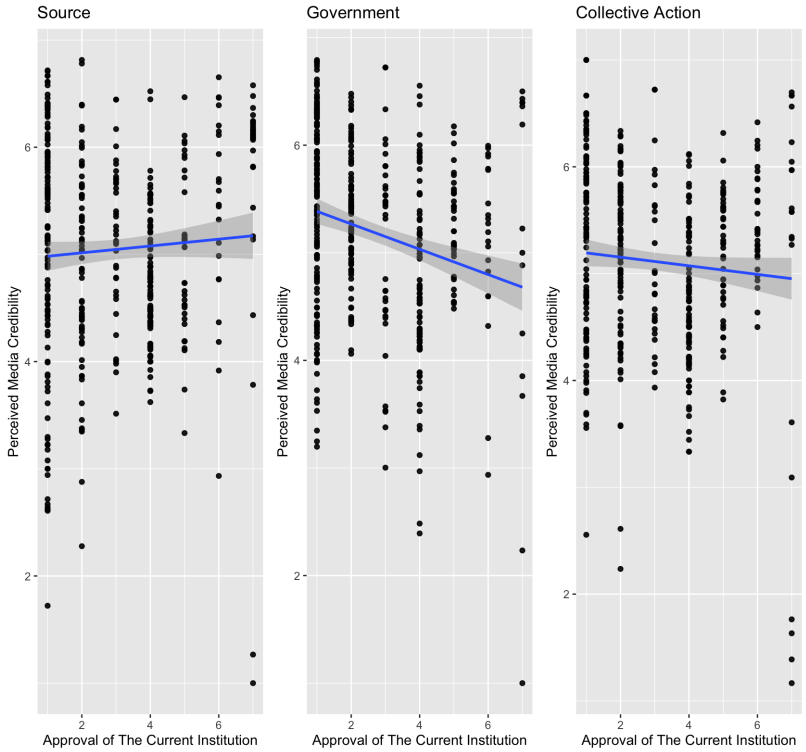

Figure 4.2: Relationship between respondents' support of the current political system controlled by CCP and the perceived information credibility

3. Pan and Xu, "China's ideological spectrum."

Table 4.3: Excerpt of Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics (Substituting the Political Attitude Dimension with the Approval/Disapproval of the CCP governance dimension)

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

Note: In comparison to table 4.2 *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The Interactive Effects on Media Credibility

Next, in order to demonstrate whether censorship likelihood contributes to the credibility of political rumors online as suggested by my hypothesis, I will analyze the data by the interactive regression model. Since the experimental groups on government criticism and on collective action show no total treatment effects, they will be left out in this section. The two variables I'm interested in are respondents' judgements on the censorship likelihood of the information, and how well they understand government censorship. The former variable

is tested to validate my hypothesis and the second variable is of interest due to the results shown by the additive regression models.

Table 4.4: Additive and Interactive Models for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:				
	Credibility				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	−0.395***	−0.423***	−0.395***	−0.973***	−0.955***
	(0.092)	(0.090)	(0.090)	(0.293)	(0.319)
Censor_Likelihood		0.175***		0.102*	
		(0.037)		(0.052)	
Censor_Knowledge			0.195***		0.126**
			(0.038)		(0.053)
Treatment:Censor_Likelihood				0.144**	
				(0.073)	
Treatment:Censor_Knowledge					0.138*
					(0.076)
Constant	5.245***	4.589***	4.455***	4.865***	4.735***
	(0.065)	(0.151)	(0.166)	(0.206)	(0.226)
Observations	420	420	420	420	420
R^2	0.042	0.091	0.099	0.100	0.106
Adjusted R^2	0.039	0.087	0.095	0.093	0.100
Residual Std. Error	0.947 (df = 418)	0.924 (df = 417)	0.920 (df = 417)	0.920 (df = 416)	0.917 (df = 416)
F Statistic	18.207*** (df = 1; 418)	20.980*** (df = 2; 417)	22.890*** (df = 2; 417)	15.377*** (df = 3; 416)	16.462*** (df = 3; 416)
Note:					*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Then, as illustrated by 4.4, interactions are found for both variables of interest, and the monotonicity assumption of analysis is guaranteed by a posterior check on the data, as illustrated by 4.1. The censorship likelihood does contribute positively to the credibility of political rumors online as suggested by the hypothesis. This suggests that government censorship could be counter productive because when citizens regard a piece of politically sensitive information as more likely to be subject to government censorship, they are more likely to believe in the information, even when it's actually a rumor. Also, respondents' possession of knowledge on government censorship contributes positively to the media credibility. This suggests that citizens who are well educated in terms of the media environment in China will more likely to believe in the politically sensitive information online. However, the magnitude

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

Who is More Sensitive Towards the Government Censorship

The censorship likelihood variable in the model, as suggested in the measurement section, captures how sensitive the respondent is towards the government censorship. Then, what factors are related to respondents' sensitivity towards the government censorship is also of interest. By applying a simple additive regression model, I find several variables that are co-related with respondents' ratings on the censorship likelihood for each piece of information presented in the experiments as suggested by A.29, A.31, and A.33 in the appendix. However, it is important to understand that the regression results for this section are not obtained in a randomized experiment as the previous additive and interactive regression models on media credibility. Thus, the relationships identified should be understood as mere associations instead of causal inferences. Also, the results are conditioning a given piece of rumor and thus no comparisons can be made between different pieces of information since no mediation effect is found.

First of all, respondents' knowledge on censorship is positively related to their judgement on whether a piece of information is likely to be censored. This should not be surprising

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

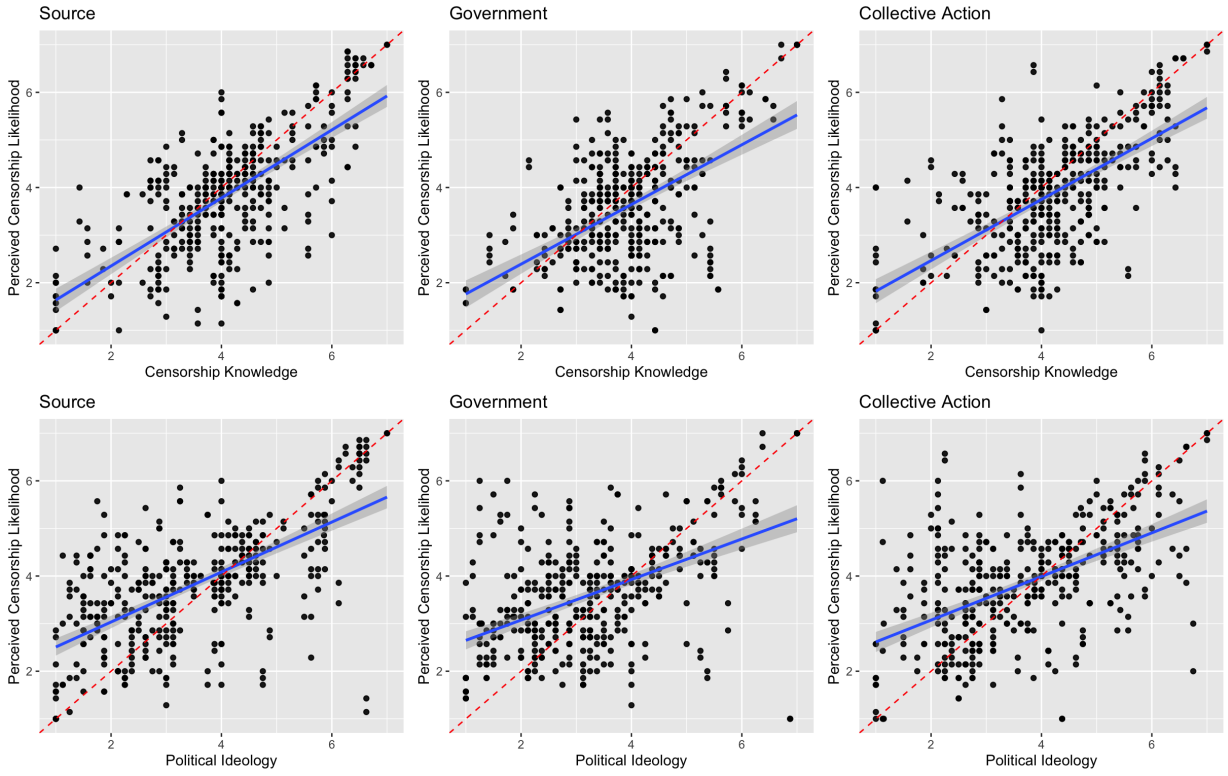

Figure 4.3: The Co-relation between Censorship Knowledge, Political Attitude and People's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (without controlling for any other demographic or political characteristics)

Political attitudes are also found to be relevant. People who favor more liberal political ideology are more likely to label the information as "subject to censorship." However, as illustrated by 4.3, the variance of the data for political attitude is a little bit larger than the variance of data for the censorship knowledge. This suggests that the political ideology may have a varied influence on people's sensitivity towards government censorship. One plausible explanation for the phenomenon is that citizens with different political ideologies may share a similar view on the government censorship. This explanation is supported by the qualitative interview data, as will be shown in later sections.

Table 4.5: Relationship between One's Support of the Current Political System in China and One's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship (Excerpt of Additive Regression Models)

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
CCP_Disapproval	0.072***	0.074**	0.157***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Constant	0.652**	1.185***	0.108
	(0.284)	(0.286)	(0.328)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.584	0.615	0.549
Adjusted R^2	0.569	0.600	0.532
Residual Std. Error (df = 404)	0.777	0.779	0.805
F Statistic (df = 15; 404)	37.862***	42.961***	32.732***
Note: Controlled for all other co-variates			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Also, it is worth noting that the relationship between one's political attitudes and one's sensitivity towards state censorship remains the same if the liberal political ideology measurement is replaced by the single survey question evaluating whether the respondent opposes the current political system controlled by CCP. Since the loss of explanation power

is trivial, the result echos with the idea that the approval or disapproval of the CCP lies in the center of political ideology measurement in China.

Finally, respondents' judgements on media bias and the perceived censorship likelihood of the information is positively co-related. This suggests that respondents may regard biased information, or information with stronger opinions, as more likely to be censored in general. This also speaks to why citizens in China will conduct self-censoring when posting opinions online: they well understand that strong opinions are likely to be watched by the government.

Overview on Qualitative Results

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

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Sample Characteristics

The qualitative responses collected from the online survey experiments share the same demographics with the quantitative data, while the effective response rate for those

free response questions are about 50% for each experimental group. I count all meaningful responses, regardless of their length, as effective responses to the free response questions in the survey experiment. The qualitative interviews consist of 15 respondents, who are sampled by a snow ball sampling, on the campus of University of Michigan—Ann Arbor. The interview samples have both undergraduate and graduate students. The length of their living in mainland China ranges from 7.5 years to 20 years. To eliminate extreme cases, all interview samples are drawn without political science majors, which presumably gives better training to the students in how to understand the Chinese political situations.

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

The Role of Censorship Likelihood

In the survey experiment, I find that media credibility increased as the censorship likelihood is perceived as higher. However, two questions remain unanswered: why an unbalanced statistical variation of data is witnessed in figure 4.1 across experimental groups, and whether the interaction effect is invariant across different social groups. In order to investigate into these questions, I ask respondents when would they believe in rumors containing sensitive information regarding the spread of coronavirus in China and why. I also designed several questions to assess how likely the respondents will pay attention to information related to politics online.

In summary, the qualitative interviews largely support the hypothesis that people will believe more in the information online if they regard them as more likely to be censored. However, instead of being generic, the respondents can be broken down into two groups: those who are interested in politics and those who are not. Respondents who regularly read political news online showed a clearer inclination towards the claim when compared to respondents who mainly looked up entertainment and sports news online. When asked whether she believed in rumors containing some sensitive clues suggesting government wrongdoings during the recent coronavirus crisis, a respondent said in the interview:"Although maybe not an absolute yes, but I think it's the case most of the time. Or at least it arouses my interests into the case [...] I think the government has faults [...] After all, they should have controlled the Red Cross Association in Wuhan better." Another interviewer gave an example of the online discussion of how the bureaucratic system and why local officials have motivation to cover up the crisis at beginning:"I know it (the discussion) won't be preserved for long [...], but the facts and analysis seem reasonable to me, precisely because it talks about some inner incidents that are sensitive [...] I may keep silent in public, but if you ask me whether I believe it, I may say so. " Her emphasis on real details is similar to the findings where personal anecdotes can increase media credibility. Yet, an important characteristics of those "detailed internal informaion" is that they are subject to potential state censorship.[4]

The main reason why people regard such "inner" or "sensitive" information as in part credible is that they believe the government will cover up the materials endangering its legitimacy. Therefore, the judgement is based on their knowledge that the censorship exists in China. These facts, when laid out in a detailed or convincing fashion, can swing the

4. Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control."

credibility of the information. For instance, several respondents mention in the interviews that if these politically sensitive clues contain figures or videos, then they will have even more confidence in the information.

Consequently, a potential explanation to the variation seen in the experimental data is the as follows. While the interactive treatment effect is not the same across different groups, the impact of politically sensitive information depends on the respondent's type. Respondents who are more interested in politics have a larger chance to rate the censorship likelihood of the information as higher and believe in the information. Respondents who are less interested in politics, on the other hand, may rate the censorship likelihood and the credibility of the information variously.

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

The Party Media as an Authority

The second question I'd like to examine with the qualitative data is why respondents express a trust in the party media over foreign news outlets. To better understand this direct treatment effect found in the experiment, I ask interviewees on their media consumption

behaviors, their impressions of foreign news agencies, and their perception of the party media outlets. The answer to this question is not trivial. In fact, different groups of people may well give the same judgement based on completely different reasons. In general, I identified three types of reasons: ignorance, inability, and appreciation.

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

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

if they are ignorant of the government censorship, they will regard the state-sponsored news from China as more trustworthy when compared to the "fake news" of the foreign media outlets.

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

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

censorship in China is effective in terms of preventing citizens from continuously believing in an alternative source in the first place.

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

Indifference, Self-Censorship and Credibility

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

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

when politically uninterested respondents are asked whether they trust or want to spread the information.

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

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

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

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

Another conclusion about the social context in which the statistical results should be understood is regarding the reason to self-censor. While the qualitative responses collected from the survey data overwhelmingly mention the fear of being caught by the internet police in China, interviewees in the United States express more caution in avoiding conflicts in online discussions. Consequently, different media environments could provide different motivations to self-censor: students who study abroad may care less about the state repression because they are far from mainland, but may pay more attention to potential conflicts with their nationalist friends.

Conditional Acquiescence to the Government Censorship

The final observation I make out of the qualitative data is how people understand censorship in general. It's surprising that all respondents firmly state that they think censorship is justifiable under certain conditions during the interviews, although they differ in the level of understanding, in the level of interest, and in the level of pro-liberal ideologies. The typical justification given to the government censorship are of two kinds: prevention of rumors and the maintenance of stability. The respondents all agree on the statement that the government is obligated to remove rumors online, so that there is someone who can ensure the information online is correct. Nevertheless, they admit that the facts, especially the politically sensitive facts examined by this study, are only known to the government. Also, the respondents all express an appreciation of social stability. A typical argument given would be that due to the large size of population in China, a provocative information online can easily cause social unrest and thus the government should use censorship to prevent catastrophes. A radical respondent who supports this view even gives the following

defense of the government censorship:"The ordinary citizens should not have access to all the facts. The government should decide what citizens need to know so that the citizens won't prevent the government from solving the problem [...] I don't care whether the figure of people infected (by the coronavirus) published by the government is censored or not. I only care whether we can contain the infection, which is the true problem. We should be pragmatic." Interestingly, these two reasons are also the most frequently used reasons for the authoritarian regimes to defend their conduction of censorship.

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

Another potential explanation is the difference in how people understand the concept of "freedom of speech." Similar to the debate of whether hate speech and political advertisement should be considered a part of the "full freedom of speech" in the United States, the rise of political polarization and misinformation online could have created a different expectation and understanding of "freedom of speech" among Chinese citizens. As Chinese citizens share a consensus over the importance of stability, they could well agree on the

government standing that freedom of speech should not endanger social stability. Such an understanding can be summarized by a sentence from the recent party propaganda: "The internet is not beyond the law." (互联网不是法外之地) This naturally sets a boundary to the freedom of speech and prohibits citizens from discussing sensitive political issues, even when they think the freedom of speech is actually protected.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Future Research

Other Results from the Pilot Survey Experiments

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

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

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

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

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

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

Implications of the Research

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

Theoretically, the research laid a foundation to understand how political characteristics associated with or fostered by government censorship can affect people's judgement of media credibility. On one hand, the main results of the paper contribute to a neglected side of the studies on government censorship: whether censorship can have negative effects on the government even if it serves their ends. Following the research of Roberts (2018), which shows the possibility that government censorship may increase citizens' access to undesirable information, this paper illustrates the potential for government censorship to induce trust in political rumors among certain groups of citizens in China.[1] The variation of potential effects among different groups of citizens based on their social and political characteristics

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

also corresponds with the analysis framework proposed by Geddes and other authors.[2] This suggests that even though the government censorship could have negative effects, the magnitude of the effects may not be ubiquitous across the population. It could strengthen the support of national narration in favor of CCP among citizens with less knowledge concerning censorship, while give more credits to political rumors among citizens who are familiar with government censorship. Therefore, this may lead to an increased polarization in China around the main political cleavage, which is to support or oppose the CCP ruling.

On the other hand, the research fits into a larger discussion in the field of political communication. Since we are entering an age of general media distrust and polarization, this could have a profound theoretical implication on investigating how the government can use "fake news" as a political weapon. In democracies, fake news labels are usually based on partisanship and are used by right-wing populist leaders to attack their domestic political opponents. The research suggests a possibility that the authoritarian regimes can use similar strategies to attack foreign news with different ideologies. By establishing the party media as the ultimate authority concerning controversial or polarized political issues, the Chinese government can successfully control mainstream public opinion online. This implication is supported by a Bayesian factor analysis analyzing how the three dimensions—source, message and medium—are contributing to the overall media credibility of the controlled version information in all three experimental groups. As illustrated by table 5.1, the factor loading for the source credibility is the largest among three dimensions for all experimental groups when it comes to the measurement on controlled version information. In fact, the loading of source credibility is always significantly larger than that of message credibility,

2. Geddes and Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes."

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

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

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

Table 5.1: Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Controlled Version)

Nevertheless, even though a similar distinction between the credibility of public and private media sources is found across different types of regimes, it is hard to determine

whether the distinction is caused by the same reason. In democracies, public broadcast gain more credibility in providing detailed and unbiased political information.[3] Therefore, citizens are better informed when they watch public broadcast and can in turn trust the media source. As suggested by table 5.2, message credibility matters most for respondents in judging media credibility when the information is coming from news media located in Singapore. As the news on China is less likely to be censored by the Singapore government, it could provide more detailed and objective political information. This provides a parallel, even though it's not perfect, to the story of public broadcast in established democracies. In autocracies, on the contrary, the official media outlets tend to provide less detailed and more biased information due to government censorship. Consequently, the underlying mechanism which leads to a high credibility of official media in authoritarian regimes should be understood differently from the story in democracies.

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

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

Table 5.2: Posterior density summary of the measurement model of media credibility (Treated Version)

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

Limitations and Proposal for Future Research

Admittedly, the interactive regression models in 4.4 explains less variance in the data compared to the additive regression models controlling for demographics and other political characteristics of the respondents. Therefore, it is clear that the political characteristics measured in the model are more likely to work as a whole instead of working independently. In fact, the variables are theoretically interrelated to instead of independent from each other. For instance, the respondents who prefer liberal political ideology are more likely to distrust the government and equip themselves with more sophisticated knowledge concerning the government censorship. Then, a natural objection to raise is that endogenous effects may exist in the analysis models. I will fully accept this objection since it would be hard to eliminate such influences and establish a single, completely independent causal inference path. Both the interactive regression model and the mediation model can not solve the problem. Furthermore, the main focus of this study is not to argue that censorship likelihood is the single prominent variable contributing to the credibility of political rumors in China. Instead, I'd like to prove that it's one of the potential contributors and thus a better understanding of censorship effects can be constructed.

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

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

Conclusion

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

Besides, the secondary hypotheses on what affects people's judgement on censorship likelihood are generally proved. Although no causal inferences could be made, the mere associations are found to be significant. People's understanding of what contents will be classified as sensitive and subject to censorship is positively related to their knowledge on government censorship. Thus, people with more sophisticated knowledge concerning censorship are more likely to identify any piece of sensitive information as subject to censorship. However, simultaneously, the possession of general knowledge concerning politics seems to be irrelevant. Also, given any piece of politically sensitive information, people who have a stronger perception that the government perception exists are more likely to identify any piece of sensitive information as subject to censorship.

Furthermore, the data also suggests that strategic censorship in China can be effective in three aspects. First of all, it prevents people from developing a systematic understand-

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

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

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Appendix A

Full Regression Results of The First Wave Pilot Sample

Abbreviations

For all following tables, we have:

- Y: Perceived credibility of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more credible)
- X: Whether the information displayed received a treatment (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- M: Perceived censorship likelihood of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be censored)
- Gen: Gender indicator (0 for male and 1 for female)
- Age: Age indicator (1 for 16-22, 2 for 23-28, 3 for 28-40, 4 for 41-50)
- Edu: Education level indicator (1 for highschool, 2 for bachelor, 3 for master, 4 for PhD)
- PM: Party membership indicator (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- In: Annual income indicator (1 for <36k, 2 for 36k-144k, 3 for 144k-300k, 4 for 300k-420k, 5 for 420k-660, 6 for 660k-960k, 7 for >960k)
- PP: Political prior indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be liberal and anti-government)

- PK: Political knowledge indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to equip basic political knowledge)
- CP: General attitude towards censorship indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be aware of and cautious of government censorship)

Control/Source

Table A.1: Mediation Results for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.264	−0.264	−0.069
	(0.177)	(0.178)	(0.190)
M		−0.006	
		(0.093)	
Constant	4.746***	4.769***	3.669***
	(0.125)	(0.362)	(0.134)
Observations	104	104	104
R^2	0.021	0.021	0.001
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.002	-0.008
Residual Std. Error	0.902 (df = 102)	0.906 (df = 101)	0.969 (df = 102)
F Statistic	2.223 (df = 1; 102)	1.103 (df = 2; 101)	0.133 (df = 1; 102)

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

Table A.2: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.264	−0.272*	−0.276*
	(0.178)	(0.152)	(0.153)
M	−0.006	−0.116	−0.175
	(0.093)	(0.082)	(0.111)
Gen		0.391**	0.427***
		(0.150)	(0.157)
Age		0.231**	0.205*
		(0.108)	(0.111)
Edu		−0.120	−0.069
		(0.162)	(0.171)
PM		−0.068	−0.063
		(0.177)	(0.180)
In		0.242***	0.235***
		(0.060)	(0.062)
PP			0.115
			(0.110)
PK			0.015
			(0.102)
CP			−0.019
			(0.107)
Constant	4.769***	4.037***	3.832***
	(0.362)	(0.402)	(0.489)
Observations	104	104	104
R^2	0.021	0.322	0.333
Adjusted R^2	0.002	0.273	0.261
Residual Std. Error	0.906 (df = 101)	0.773 (df = 96)	0.779 (df = 93)
F Statistic	1.103 (df = 2; 101)	6.522*** (df = 7; 96)	4.644*** (df = 10; 93)

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

Table A.3: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.069	−0.069	−0.069
	(0.190)	(0.188)	(0.142)
Gen		−0.119	0.168
		(0.185)	(0.145)
Age		0.107	−0.041
		(0.133)	(0.103)
Edu		−0.018	0.172
		(0.200)	(0.157)
PM		0.034	0.150
		(0.219)	(0.166)
In		0.109	−0.015
		(0.073)	(0.057)
PP			0.205**
			(0.100)
PK			−0.143
			(0.094)
CP			0.408***
			(0.090)
Constant	3.669***	3.186***	1.467***
	(0.134)	(0.377)	(0.428)
Observations	104	104	104
R^2	0.001	0.075	0.488
Adjusted R^2	-0.008	0.018	0.438
Residual Std. Error	0.969 (df = 102)	0.957 (df = 97)	0.723 (df = 94)
F Statistic	0.133 (df = 1; 102)	1.307 (df = 6; 97)	9.936*** (df = 9; 94)

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

Control/Government

Table A.4: Mediation Results for Government Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.310	−0.383*	0.246
	(0.206)	(0.199)	(0.205)
M		0.295***	
		(0.092)	
Constant	4.411***	3.186***	4.154***
	(0.146)	(0.406)	(0.145)
Observations	112	112	112
R^2	0.020	0.105	0.013
Adjusted R^2	0.011	0.089	0.004
Residual Std. Error	1.089 (df = 110)	1.046 (df = 109)	1.085 (df = 110)
F Statistic	2.273 (df = 1; 110)	6.389*** (df = 2; 109)	1.443 (df = 1; 110)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.5: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.383*	−0.371*	−0.331*
	(0.199)	(0.194)	(0.167)
M	0.295***	0.248***	0.086
	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.090)
Gen		−0.313	−0.598***
		(0.204)	(0.190)
Age		0.165	0.193*
		(0.115)	(0.107)
Edu		−0.343**	−0.276*
		(0.154)	(0.144)
PM		0.189	0.472**
		(0.221)	(0.198)
In		0.018	0.030
		(0.068)	(0.060)
PP			0.465***
			(0.082)
PK			0.109
			(0.093)
CP			−0.053
			(0.096)
Constant	3.186***	3.714***	2.376***
	(0.406)	(0.539)	(0.622)
Observations	112	112	112
R^2	0.105	0.191	0.416
Adjusted R^2	0.089	0.136	0.358
Residual Std. Error	1.046 (df = 109)	1.018 (df = 104)	0.878 (df = 101)
F Statistic	6.389*** (df = 2; 109)	3.502*** (df = 7; 104)	7.180*** (df = 10; 101)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.6: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.246	0.246	0.246
	(0.205)	(0.205)	(0.182)
Gen		−0.084	−0.063
		(0.217)	(0.209)
Age		0.202*	0.198*
		(0.121)	(0.116)
Edu		−0.124	−0.025
		(0.163)	(0.158)
PM		0.248	0.251
		(0.234)	(0.216)
In		0.020	0.072
		(0.072)	(0.065)
PP			0.090
			(0.090)
PK			0.210**
			(0.100)
CP			0.368***
			(0.098)
Constant	4.154***	3.810***	0.940
	(0.145)	(0.438)	(0.677)
Observations	112	112	112
R^2	0.013	0.058	0.278
Adjusted R^2	0.004	0.004	0.215
Residual Std. Error	1.085 (df = 110)	1.085 (df = 105)	0.964 (df = 102)
F Statistic	1.443 (df = 1; 110)	1.078 (df = 6; 105)	4.372*** (df = 9; 102)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Control/Collective Action

Table A.7: Mediation Results for Collective Action Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.192	−0.204	0.060
	(0.196)	(0.192)	(0.220)
M		0.208**	
		(0.086)	
Constant	4.661***	3.843***	3.936***
	(0.139)	(0.363)	(0.155)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.009	0.063	0.001
Adjusted R^2	-0.0004	0.044	-0.009
Residual Std. Error	1.011 (df = 104)	0.988 (df = 103)	1.131 (df = 104)
F Statistic	0.954 (df = 1; 104)	3.444** (df = 2; 103)	0.076 (df = 1; 104)

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

Table A.8: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.204	−0.205	−0.210
	(0.192)	(0.184)	(0.173)
M	0.208**	0.224***	0.309***
	(0.086)	(0.084)	(0.104)
Gen		−0.322	−0.210
		(0.195)	(0.188)
Age		0.162	0.154
		(0.118)	(0.111)
Edu		−0.583***	−0.700***
		(0.177)	(0.179)
PM		0.295	0.233
		(0.217)	(0.207)
In		0.066	0.079
		(0.065)	(0.062)
PP			0.250**
			(0.113)
PK			0.314***
			(0.094)
CP			−0.262**
			(0.112)
Constant	3.843***	4.417***	3.424***
	(0.363)	(0.492)	(0.575)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.063	0.183	0.298
Adjusted R^2	0.044	0.125	0.224
Residual Std. Error	0.988 (df = 103)	0.946 (df = 98)	0.890 (df = 95)
F Statistic	3.444** (df = 2; 103)	3.136*** (df = 7; 98)	4.039*** (df = 10; 95)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.9: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.060	0.060	0.060
	(0.220)	(0.220)	(0.170)
Gen		0.320	−0.033
		(0.230)	(0.185)
Age		0.077	0.082
		(0.141)	(0.109)
Edu		0.129	0.462***
		(0.212)	(0.169)
PM		0.255	0.201
		(0.259)	(0.202)
In		−0.103	−0.062
		(0.077)	(0.061)
PP			0.053
			(0.110)
PK			−0.066
			(0.092)
CP			0.461***
			(0.099)
Constant	3.936***	3.647***	1.282**
	(0.155)	(0.460)	(0.549)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.001	0.051	0.450
Adjusted R^2	-0.009	-0.007	0.398
Residual Std. Error	1.131 (df = 104)	1.130 (df = 99)	0.874 (df = 96)
F Statistic	0.076 (df = 1; 104)	0.878 (df = 6; 99)	8.712*** (df = 9; 96)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix B

Full Regression Results of The Second Wave Pilot Sample

Abbreviations

For all following tables, we have:

- Y: Perceived credibility of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more credible)
- X: Whether the information displayed received a treatment (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- M: Perceived censorship likelihood of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be censored)
- Gen: Gender indicator (0 for male and 1 for female)
- Age: Age indicator (1 for 16-22, 2 for 23-28, 3 for 28-40, 4 for 41-50)
- Edu: Education level indicator (1 for highschool, 2 for bachelor, 3 for master, 4 for PhD)
- PM: Party membership indicator (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- In: Annual income indicator (1 for ¡36k, 2 for 36k-144k, 3 for 144k-300k, 4 for 300k-420k, 5 for 420k-660, 6 for 660k-960k, 7 for ¿960k)
- PP: Political prior indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be liberal and anti-government)

- PK: Political knowledge indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to equip basic political knowledge)
- CP: General attitude towards censorship indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be aware of and cautious of government censorship)

Control/Source

Table A.10: Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.175	−0.147	−0.062
	(0.204)	(0.168)	(0.255)
M		0.458***	
		(0.061)	
Constant	4.827***	2.916***	4.174***
	(0.144)	(0.280)	(0.181)
Observations	120	120	120
R^2	0.006	0.332	0.0005
Adjusted R^2	-0.002	0.320	-0.008
Residual Std. Error	1.119 (df = 118)	0.922 (df = 117)	1.399 (df = 118)
F Statistic	0.734 (df = 1; 118)	29.033*** (df = 2; 117)	0.059 (df = 1; 118)

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

Table A.11: Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.186	−0.188	−0.062
	(0.175)	(0.163)	(0.259)
M		0.416***	
		(0.059)	
Constant	4.957***	3.174***	4.263***
	(0.124)	(0.271)	(0.183)
Observations	120	120	120
Residual Std. Error	0.910 (df = 118)	0.712 (df = 117)	1.356 (df = 118)

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

Table A.12: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.147	−0.151	−0.161
	(0.168)	(0.163)	(0.156)
M	0.458***	0.393***	0.227**
	(0.061)	(0.065)	(0.096)
Gen		−0.090	−0.079
		(0.173)	(0.167)
Age		0.096	0.109
		(0.107)	(0.103)
Edu		−0.033	−0.069
		(0.160)	(0.156)
PM		0.099	0.126
		(0.179)	(0.178)
In		0.176***	0.194***
		(0.062)	(0.060)
PP			0.225**
			(0.096)
PK			0.320***
			(0.101)
CP			−0.025
			(0.094)
Constant	2.916***	2.441***	1.314**
	(0.280)	(0.419)	(0.557)
Observations	120	120	120
R^2	0.332	0.401	0.464
Adjusted R^2	0.320	0.363	0.415
Residual Std. Error	0.922 (df = 117)	0.892 (df = 112)	0.855 (df = 109)
F Statistic	29.033*** (df = 2; 117)	10.695*** (df = 7; 112)	9.429*** (df = 10; 109)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.13: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Source Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.188	−0.183	−0.185
	(0.163)	(0.138)	(0.140)
M	0.416***	0.291***	0.183**
	(0.059)	(0.055)	(0.086)
Gen		0.107	0.122
		(0.146)	(0.149)
Age		0.161*	0.171*
		(0.090)	(0.092)
Edu		−0.071	−0.104
		(0.136)	(0.139)
PM		0.149	0.182
		(0.152)	(0.159)
In		0.198***	0.198***
		(0.053)	(0.054)
PP			0.222***
			(0.085)
PK			0.141
			(0.090)
CP			−0.116
			(0.084)
Constant	3.174***	2.721***	2.363***
	(0.271)	(0.355)	(0.497)
Observations	120	120	120
Residual Std. Error	0.712 (df = 117)	0.628 (df = 112)	0.610 (df = 109)

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

Table A.14: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.062	−0.062	−0.062
	(0.255)	(0.237)	(0.155)
Gen		0.148	−0.014
		(0.251)	(0.166)
Age		0.340**	0.146
		(0.152)	(0.102)
Edu		0.204	0.181
		(0.233)	(0.154)
PM		0.761***	0.094
		(0.251)	(0.176)
In		0.124	0.062
		(0.090)	(0.059)
PP			0.586***
			(0.077)
PK			0.244**
			(0.097)
CP			0.162*
			(0.092)
Constant	4.174***	2.165***	−0.537
	(0.181)	(0.575)	(0.550)
Observations	120	120	120
R^2	0.0005	0.175	0.657
Adjusted R^2	-0.008	0.131	0.628
Residual Std. Error	1.399 (df = 118)	1.299 (df = 113)	0.849 (df = 110)
F Statistic	0.059 (df = 1; 118)	3.989*** (df = 6; 113)	23.367*** (df = 9; 110)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.15: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.062	−0.075	−0.069
	(0.259)	(0.235)	(0.138)
Gen		0.264	0.048
		(0.249)	(0.147)
Age		0.367**	0.115
		(0.151)	(0.090)
Edu		0.234	0.204
		(0.230)	(0.136)
PM		0.518**	0.090
		(0.249)	(0.156)
In		0.136	0.078
		(0.089)	(0.053)
PP			0.566***
			(0.068)
PK			0.211**
			(0.086)
CP			0.207**
			(0.082)
Constant	4.263***	2.180***	−0.595
	(0.183)	(0.570)	(0.488)
Observations	120	120	120
Residual Std. Error	1.356 (df = 118)	1.058 (df = 113)	0.632 (df = 110)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Control/Government

Table A.16: Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.250	0.234	0.070
	(0.219)	(0.214)	(0.213)
M		0.232**	
		(0.098)	
Constant	4.570***	3.617***	4.100***
	(0.155)	(0.431)	(0.151)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.012	0.063	0.001
Adjusted R^2	0.003	0.045	-0.009
Residual Std. Error	1.127 (df = 104)	1.103 (df = 103)	1.099 (df = 104)
F Statistic	1.305 (df = 1; 104)	3.468** (df = 2; 103)	0.108 (df = 1; 104)

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

Table A.17: Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.215	0.173	0.063
	(0.223)	(0.209)	(0.203)
M		0.340***	
		(0.096)	
Constant	4.626***	3.266***	3.996***
	(0.158)	(0.420)	(0.144)
Observations	106	106	106
Residual Std. Error	1.297 (df = 104)	1.107 (df = 103)	0.847 (df = 104)

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

Table A.18: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.234	0.240	0.229
	(0.214)	(0.196)	(0.195)
M	0.232**	0.137	0.294**
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.125)
Gen		−0.166	−0.117
		(0.200)	(0.201)
Age		0.308**	0.363**
		(0.137)	(0.150)
Edu		−0.076	0.018
		(0.196)	(0.219)
PM		0.712***	0.680***
		(0.200)	(0.201)
In		0.142*	0.074
		(0.074)	(0.085)
PP			−0.066
			(0.129)
PK			−0.071
			(0.124)
CP			−0.160
			(0.141)
Constant	3.617***	2.692***	3.029***
	(0.431)	(0.579)	(0.672)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.063	0.252	0.285
Adjusted R^2	0.045	0.199	0.210
Residual Std. Error	1.103 (df = 103)	1.010 (df = 98)	1.003 (df = 95)
F Statistic	3.468** (df = 2; 103)	4.726*** (df = 7; 98)	3.791*** (df = 10; 95)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.19: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Government Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.173	0.146	0.156
	(0.209)	(0.183)	(0.180)
M	0.340***	0.164*	0.311***
	(0.096)	(0.088)	(0.115)
Gen		−0.031	0.036
		(0.186)	(0.186)
Age		0.338***	0.347**
		(0.127)	(0.138)
Edu		−0.058	0.092
		(0.183)	(0.202)
PM		0.599***	0.581***
		(0.186)	(0.185)
In		0.180***	0.093
		(0.069)	(0.078)
PP			−0.014
			(0.119)
PK			−0.134
			(0.114)
CP			−0.177
			(0.130)
Constant	3.266***	2.484***	2.976***
	(0.420)	(0.540)	(0.620)
Observations	106	106	106
Residual Std. Error	1.107 (df = 103)	0.747 (df = 98)	0.768 (df = 95)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.20: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
		M	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.070	0.070	0.070
	(0.213)	(0.208)	(0.159)
Gen		0.207	−0.002
		(0.211)	(0.164)
Age		0.202	0.019
		(0.144)	(0.122)
Edu		−0.374*	−0.337*
		(0.204)	(0.176)
PM		0.208	0.194
		(0.211)	(0.163)
In		0.131*	0.251***
		(0.077)	(0.064)
PP			0.069
			(0.105)
PK			−0.088
			(0.101)
CP			0.479***
			(0.104)
Constant	4.100***	3.703***	1.939***
	(0.151)	(0.490)	(0.511)
Observations	106	106	106
R^2	0.001	0.094	0.488
Adjusted R^2	-0.009	0.039	0.440
Residual Std. Error	1.099 (df = 104)	1.072 (df = 99)	0.819 (df = 96)
F Statistic	0.108 (df = 1; 104)	1.718 (df = 6; 99)	10.156*** (df = 9; 96)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.21: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.063	0.021	0.045
	(0.203)	(0.204)	(0.143)
Gen		0.123	0.079
		(0.206)	(0.148)
Age		0.151	−0.020
		(0.140)	(0.110)
Edu		−0.274	−0.261*
		(0.200)	(0.158)
PM		0.175	0.169
		(0.206)	(0.147)
In		0.186**	0.196***
		(0.076)	(0.058)
PP			0.196**
			(0.095)
PK			−0.047
			(0.091)
CP			0.399***
			(0.094)
Constant	3.996***	3.460***	1.745***
	(0.144)	(0.479)	(0.460)
Observations	106	106	106
Residual Std. Error	0.847 (df = 104)	0.861 (df = 99)	0.675 (df = 96)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Control/Collective Action

Table A.22: Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.244	−0.287	0.280
	(0.205)	(0.207)	(0.187)
M		0.154	
		(0.112)	
Constant	4.339***	3.775***	3.662***
	(0.145)	(0.434)	(0.132)
Observations	98	98	98
R^2	0.014	0.034	0.023
Adjusted R^2	0.004	0.014	0.013
Residual Std. Error	1.017 (df = 96)	1.012 (df = 95)	0.925 (df = 96)
F Statistic	1.412 (df = 1; 96)	1.664 (df = 2; 95)	2.244 (df = 1; 96)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.23: Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		M
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.229	−0.264	0.317
	(0.220)	(0.225)	(0.196)
M		0.184	
		(0.121)	
Constant	4.376***	3.707***	3.643***
	(0.155)	(0.471)	(0.138)
Observations	98	98	98
Residual Std. Error	1.081 (df = 96)	0.987 (df = 95)	0.953 (df = 96)

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

Table A.24: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.287	−0.259	−0.216
	(0.207)	(0.202)	(0.201)
M	0.154	0.054	−0.100
	(0.112)	(0.122)	(0.148)
Gen		−0.299	−0.333
		(0.227)	(0.226)
Age		−0.109	−0.012
		(0.187)	(0.201)
Edu		−0.227	−0.210
		(0.240)	(0.238)
PM		0.310	0.305
		(0.239)	(0.243)
In		0.165**	0.128
		(0.079)	(0.084)
PP			0.166
			(0.148)
PK			0.047
			(0.137)
CP			0.088
			(0.108)
Constant	3.775***	4.339***	3.770***
	(0.434)	(0.587)	(0.849)
Observations	98	98	98
R^2	0.034	0.132	0.179
Adjusted R^2	0.014	0.064	0.085
Residual Std. Error	1.012 (df = 95)	0.985 (df = 90)	0.975 (df = 87)
F Statistic	1.664 (df = 2; 95)	1.951* (df = 7; 90)	1.896* (df = 10; 87)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.25: Controlled Regression Results on Y for Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	Y		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	−0.264	−0.229	−0.230
	(0.225)	(0.215)	(0.211)
M	0.184	0.049	−0.105
	(0.121)	(0.130)	(0.156)
Gen		−0.308	−0.378
		(0.241)	(0.237)
Age		−0.127	−0.037
		(0.199)	(0.211)
Edu		−0.133	−0.132
		(0.255)	(0.250)
PM		0.386	0.350
		(0.254)	(0.256)
In		0.173**	0.130
		(0.084)	(0.088)
PP			0.163
			(0.155)
PK			0.010
			(0.144)
CP			0.086
			(0.113)
Constant	3.707***	4.200***	3.862***
	(0.471)	(0.623)	(0.891)
Observations	98	98	98
Residual Std. Error	0.987 (df = 95)	0.915 (df = 90)	0.997 (df = 87)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.26: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:		
		M	
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.280	0.280	0.280*
	(0.187)	(0.171)	(0.142)
Gen		−0.104	−0.137
		(0.195)	(0.162)
Age		0.343**	0.440***
		(0.156)	(0.137)
Edu		−0.086	0.004
		(0.205)	(0.171)
PM		0.580***	0.444**
		(0.196)	(0.169)
In		0.124*	0.045
		(0.066)	(0.060)
PP			0.255**
			(0.103)
PK			−0.243**
			(0.095)
CP			0.081
			(0.077)
Constant	3.662***	2.464***	2.096***
	(0.132)	(0.431)	(0.569)
Observations	98	98	98
R^2	0.023	0.228	0.485
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.177	0.432
Residual Std. Error	0.925 (df = 96)	0.844 (df = 91)	0.701 (df = 88)
F Statistic	2.244 (df = 1; 96)	4.475*** (df = 6; 91)	9.210*** (df = 9; 88)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.27: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group (outliers removed)

	Dependent variable:		
	M		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
X	0.317	0.298*	0.311**
	(0.196)	(0.171)	(0.128)
Gen		−0.070	−0.090
		(0.195)	(0.146)
Age		0.296*	0.382***
		(0.157)	(0.124)
Edu		−0.077	0.018
		(0.206)	(0.155)
PM		0.581***	0.406***
		(0.196)	(0.153)
In		0.139**	0.064
		(0.066)	(0.055)
PP			0.191**
			(0.093)
PK			−0.248***
			(0.086)
CP			0.154**
			(0.070)
Constant	3.643***	2.477***	2.100***
	(0.138)	(0.433)	(0.514)
Observations	98	98	98
Residual Std. Error	0.953 (df = 96)	0.856 (df = 91)	0.611 (df = 88)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix C

Full Regression Results and Bayesian Analysis Results of The Survey Experiments

Abbreviations

For all following tables, we have:

- Credibility: Perceived credibility of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more credible)
- Treatment: Whether the information displayed received a treatment and contain an alternation of source, critisicm of government officials, or a call for collective action (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- Censor_Likelihood: Perceived censorship likelihood of the information (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be censored)
- Gen: Gender indicator (0 for male and 1 for female)
- Age: Age indicator (1 for 16-22, 2 for 23-28, 3 for 28-40, 4 for 41-50)
- College: Binary, whether the respondent receives a bachelor's degree or above (1 yes and 0 for no)
- Member: Party membership indicator (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- Probation: Probation party membership indicator (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- Student: Whether the respondent is a student (1 for yes and 0 for no)
- State_Employed: Whether the respondent works in a state-owned company (1 for yes and 0 for no)

- Income: Annual income indicator (1 for less than 36k, 2 for 36k to 144k, 3 for 144k to 300k, 4 for 300k to 420k, 5 for 420k to 660, 6 for 660k to 960k, 7 for more than 960k)
- Political_Attitude: Political prior indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to be liberal and anti-government)
- General_Knowledge: Political knowledge indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to equip basic political knowledge)
- Censor_Knowledge: Political knowledge on Government Censorship indicator (ranging from 1 to 7, the higher scores means the respondent thinks the information is more likely to equip basic political knowledge)
- Selfcensor: intention to self-censor online (from 1 to 7, the higher the score, the more likely the respondent will self-censor)
- Censor_Perception: General perception on the existence of censorship (1 to 7, the higher the score, the more sensitive the respondent is to the censorship)
- Bias: Bias indicator (1 to 7, the higher the score, the more biased the repondent thinks the information is)

Control/Source

Table A.28: Mediation Results on Source Treatment Group (with outliers)

	Dependent variable:			
	Credibility			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	−0.395***	−0.423***	−0.419***	−0.375***
	(0.092)	(0.090)	(0.088)	(0.086)
Censor_Likelihood		0.175***	0.150***	0.203***
		(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.057)
Gender			−0.264***	−0.266***
			(0.093)	(0.090)
Age			0.106	0.128*
			(0.067)	(0.065)
College			−0.230	−0.324*
			(0.168)	(0.166)
Member			0.013	−0.005
			(0.104)	(0.103)
Probation			−0.336	−0.182
			(0.212)	(0.208)
Student			−0.116	−0.077
			(0.185)	(0.183)
State_Employed			0.064	0.112
			(0.106)	(0.106)
Income			0.062**	0.055*
			(0.030)	(0.030)
Political_Attitude				0.015
				(0.046)
General_Knowledge				0.151
				(0.099)
Censor_Knowledge				0.196***
				(0.063)
Selfcensor				0.032
				(0.040)
Censor_Perception				−0.119**
				(0.054)
Bias				−0.137***
				(0.029)
Constant	5.245***	4.589***	4.510***	4.205***
	(0.065)	(0.151)	(0.285)	(0.336)
Observations	420	420	420	418
R^2	0.042	0.091	0.148	0.225
Adjusted R^2	0.039	0.087	0.127	0.194
Residual Std. Error	0.947 (df = 418)	0.924 (df = 417)	0.903 (df = 409)	0.870 (df = 401)
F Statistic	18.207*** (df = 1; 418)	20.980*** (df = 2; 417)	7.091*** (df = 10; 409)	7.259*** (df = 16; 401)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.29: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Source Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	0.160	0.160	0.103
	(0.120)	(0.119)	(0.075)
Gender		−0.360***	−0.170**
		(0.124)	(0.079)
Age		0.119	−0.042
		(0.091)	(0.057)
College		0.188	−0.148
		(0.227)	(0.146)
Member		−0.048	0.046
		(0.140)	(0.090)
Probation		0.006	0.241
		(0.286)	(0.182)
Student		0.307	−0.194
		(0.250)	(0.161)
State_Employed		0.182	0.135
		(0.143)	(0.093)
Income		0.037	−0.040
		(0.041)	(0.026)
Political_Attitude			0.191***
			(0.039)
General_Knowledge			0.140
			(0.086)
Censor_Knowledge			0.342***
			(0.052)
Selfcensor			−0.020
			(0.035)
Censor_Perception			0.202***
			(0.046)
Bias			0.150***
			(0.025)
Constant	3.737***	3.203***	0.832***
	(0.085)	(0.351)	(0.292)
Observations	420	420	418
R^2	0.004	0.039	0.629
Adjusted R^2	0.002	0.018	0.616
Residual Std. Error	1.231 (df = 418)	1.220 (df = 410)	0.764 (df = 402)
F Statistic	1.772 (df = 1; 418)	1.864* (df = 9; 410)	45.503*** (df = 15; 402)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Control/Government

Table A.30: Mediation Results on Government Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:			
	Credibility			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	0.003	0.002	0.003	−0.001
	(0.087)	(0.087)	(0.083)	(0.070)
Censor_Likelihood		0.044	−0.014	0.132***
		(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.045)
Gender			−0.077	0.045
			(0.086)	(0.075)
Age			−0.058	0.008
			(0.062)	(0.053)
College			0.311	0.347**
			(0.202)	(0.173)
Member			0.170	0.064
			(0.104)	(0.091)
Probation			−0.438*	−0.279
			(0.240)	(0.205)
Student			−0.021	−0.030
			(0.185)	(0.160)
State_Employed			0.361***	0.408***
			(0.105)	(0.090)
Income			0.090***	0.036
			(0.027)	(0.024)
Political_Attitude				−0.047
				(0.037)
General_Knowledge				0.453***
				(0.077)
Censor_Knowledge				0.221***
				(0.048)
Selfcensor				0.218***
				(0.033)
Censor_Perception				−0.282***
				(0.038)
Bias				−0.079***
				(0.026)
Constant	5.178***	5.020***	4.661***	3.449***
	(0.062)	(0.147)	(0.297)	(0.303)
Observations	420	420	420	420
R^2	0.00000	0.003	0.117	0.375
Adjusted R^2	-0.002	-0.001	0.095	0.350
Residual Std. Error	0.894 (df = 418)	0.894 (df = 417)	0.850 (df = 409)	0.720 (df = 403)
F Statistic	0.001 (df = 1; 418)	0.693 (df = 2; 417)	5.400*** (df = 10; 409)	15.121*** (df = 16; 403)

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

Table A.31: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Government Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	0.026	0.026	0.026
	(0.115)	(0.110)	(0.077)
Gender		−0.259**	−0.301***
		(0.113)	(0.081)
Age		0.191**	0.057
		(0.082)	(0.059)
College		−0.020	0.134
		(0.268)	(0.191)
Member		0.278**	0.285***
		(0.137)	(0.099)
Probation		−0.014	−0.148
		(0.320)	(0.225)
Student		0.886***	0.584***
		(0.242)	(0.174)
State_Employed		0.277**	0.181*
		(0.139)	(0.099)
Income		0.139***	0.095***
		(0.036)	(0.026)
Political_Attitude			0.244***
			(0.039)
General_Knowledge			0.091
			(0.084)
Censor_Knowledge			0.190***
			(0.052)
Selfcensor			0.106***
			(0.036)
Censor_Perception			0.156***
			(0.041)
Bias			0.188***
			(0.027)
Constant	3.608***	2.468***	−0.268
	(0.081)	(0.376)	(0.334)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.0001	0.095	0.562
Adjusted R^2	-0.002	0.075	0.546
Residual Std. Error	1.177 (df = 418)	1.131 (df = 410)	0.792 (df = 404)
F Statistic	0.051 (df = 1; 418)	4.783*** (df = 9; 410)	34.589*** (df = 15; 404)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Control/Collective Action

Table A.32: Mediation Results on Collective Action Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:			
	Credibility			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	−0.040	−0.048	−0.045	−0.053
	(0.084)	(0.084)	(0.082)	(0.077)
Censor_Likelihood		0.105***	0.066*	0.152***
		(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.050)
Gender			−0.179**	−0.121
			(0.087)	(0.084)
Age			0.194***	0.111*
			(0.064)	(0.062)
College			0.028	−0.220
			(0.151)	(0.148)
Member			0.073	0.010
			(0.102)	(0.097)
Probation			−0.229	−0.052
			(0.184)	(0.176)
Student			0.083	−0.112
			(0.187)	(0.180)
State_Employed			0.054	0.085
			(0.105)	(0.100)
Income			0.037	0.066**
			(0.028)	(0.026)
Political_Attitude				0.031
				(0.039)
General_Knowledge				0.366***
				(0.086)
Censor_Knowledge				0.142**
				(0.055)
Selfcensor				0.174***
				(0.036)
Censor_Perception				−0.189***
				(0.053)
Bias				−0.035
				(0.029)
Constant	5.131***	4.730***	4.259***	3.516***
	(0.060)	(0.148)	(0.269)	(0.296)
Observations	420	420	420	420
R^2	0.001	0.021	0.085	0.203
Adjusted R^2	-0.002	0.016	0.063	0.172
Residual Std. Error	0.864 (df = 418)	0.856 (df = 417)	0.836 (df = 409)	0.786 (df = 403)
F Statistic	0.229 (df = 1; 418)	4.509** (df = 2; 417)	3.798*** (df = 10; 409)	6.425*** (df = 16; 403)

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

Table A.33: Controlled Mediator Results on M for Collective Action Treatment Group

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	0.071	0.071	0.079
	(0.116)	(0.113)	(0.076)
Gender		−0.112	−0.081
		(0.120)	(0.082)
Age		0.257***	0.120*
		(0.088)	(0.061)
College		0.008	0.017
		(0.208)	(0.146)
Member		0.314**	0.140
		(0.140)	(0.096)
Probation		−0.035	−0.076
		(0.254)	(0.173)
Student		0.275	0.080
		(0.258)	(0.177)
State_Employed		0.261*	0.268***
		(0.144)	(0.098)
Income		0.022	−0.022
		(0.038)	(0.026)
Political_Attitude			0.120***
			(0.038)
General_Knowledge			−0.009
			(0.084)
Censor_Knowledge			0.198***
			(0.054)
Selfcensor			−0.013
			(0.036)
Censor_Perception			0.288***
			(0.050)
Bias			0.182***
			(0.027)
Constant	3.827***	2.913***	0.491*
	(0.082)	(0.342)	(0.291)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.001	0.068	0.588
Adjusted R^2	-0.001	0.047	0.572
Residual Std. Error	1.184 (df = 418)	1.155 (df = 410)	0.774 (df = 404)
F Statistic	0.382 (df = 1; 418)	3.321*** (df = 9; 410)	38.367*** (df = 15; 404)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.34: Additive Regression Models Controlling for Demographics (Substituting the Political Attitude Dimension with the Approval/Disapproval of the CCP governance dimension)

	Dependent variable:		
	Credibility		
	Group:Source	Group:Government	Group:Collective Action
Treatment	−0.378***	−0.001	−0.053
	(0.086)	(0.070)	(0.077)
Censor_Likelihood	0.209***	0.130***	0.166***
	(0.056)	(0.044)	(0.050)
Gender	−0.258***	0.038	−0.120
	(0.090)	(0.075)	(0.084)
Age	0.127*	0.010	0.114*
	(0.065)	(0.053)	(0.062)
College	−0.319*	0.354**	−0.234
	(0.166)	(0.173)	(0.149)
Member	−0.016	0.062	−0.001
	(0.102)	(0.091)	(0.097)
Probation	−0.177	−0.278	−0.047
	(0.208)	(0.204)	(0.176)
Student	−0.056	−0.026	−0.115
	(0.182)	(0.158)	(0.179)
State_Employed	0.110	0.400***	0.069
	(0.106)	(0.091)	(0.100)
Income	0.056*	0.039	0.062**
	(0.030)	(0.024)	(0.026)
General_Knowledge	0.136	0.452***	0.326***
	(0.097)	(0.076)	(0.086)
Censor_Knowledge	0.204***	0.222***	0.144***
	(0.062)	(0.048)	(0.055)
Selfcensor	0.014	0.213***	0.165***
	(0.039)	(0.033)	(0.036)
Censor_Perception	−0.100*	−0.279***	−0.155***
	(0.055)	(0.038)	(0.052)
Bias	−0.134***	−0.075***	−0.030
	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.029)
CCP_Disapproval	−0.013	−0.041	−0.033
	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Constant	4.247***	3.391***	3.601***
	(0.326)	(0.293)	(0.288)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.222	0.376	0.205
Adjusted R^2	0.191	0.351	0.173
Residual Std. Error (df = 403)	0.869	0.719	0.785
F Statistic (df = 16; 403)	7.198***	15.175***	6.488***
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.35: Additive Interactive Models with Pro/Anti CCP Measurement on the Relationship between One's Support of the Current Political System in China and One's Sensitivity towards Government Censorship

	Dependent variable:		
	Censor_Likelihood		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment	0.079	0.105	0.026
	(0.076)	(0.077)	(0.079)
Gender	−0.070	−0.189**	−0.283***
	(0.083)	(0.080)	(0.083)
Age	0.111*	−0.050	0.037
	(0.061)	(0.059)	(0.059)
College	0.042	−0.170	0.078
	(0.147)	(0.148)	(0.193)
Member	0.141	0.008	0.258**
	(0.096)	(0.092)	(0.101)
Probation	−0.086	0.255	−0.176
	(0.174)	(0.186)	(0.228)
Student	0.073	−0.249	0.522***
	(0.178)	(0.162)	(0.175)
State_Employed	0.257***	0.123	0.209**
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.101)
Income	−0.023	−0.045*	0.081***
	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.026)
General_Knowledge	−0.014	0.089	0.060
	(0.085)	(0.087)	(0.085)
Censor_Knowledge	0.213***	0.380***	0.204***
	(0.054)	(0.052)	(0.053)
Selfcensor	−0.023	−0.048	0.123***
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)
Censor_Perception	0.303***	0.251***	0.175***
	(0.049)	(0.048)	(0.042)
Bias	0.179***	0.146***	0.177***
	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.028)
CCP_Disapproval	0.072***	0.074**	0.157***
	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.031)
Constant	0.652**	1.185***	0.108
	(0.284)	(0.286)	(0.328)
Observations	420	420	420
R^2	0.584	0.615	0.549
Adjusted R^2	0.569	0.600	0.532
Residual Std. Error (df = 404)	0.777	0.779	0.805
F Statistic (df = 15; 404)	37.862***	42.961***	32.732***
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix D

Experimental Materials

Pilot Survey Experiment (First Wave)

Type: Control

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

According to an inner source, the unannounced inspection was conducted due to an employee of the company revealing the illegal practices.

Type: Treated (Source)

Title: Foreign Media: Is the Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis in China questioning its public health system?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Picture: Screenshot of *BBC* news report

Ever since the vaccine crisis happened last year, another vaccine production company had become the representative of a fragile health care system in China. According to analysts, how to reconstruct the public confidence in vaccine safety will become a critical problem for the CCP in near future. (Comment from *BBC*)

BBC reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

According to an inner source, the unannounced inspection was conducted due to an employee of the company revealing the illegal practices.

"I was extremely despair as I don't know how to find my child a vaccine of good quality." *BBC* reporter found a typical comment on Weibo saying so after the crisis burst out.

Type: Treated (Government Criticism)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis—Is JIANG Zemin responsible for this?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

It is said that the fraud of production records within Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was long-existing and had been complained by patients for several times. However, the problem persisted and had never been solved. The majority stakeholder for Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was China National Biotec Group Company, which was controlled by HE Ting, the son-in-law of JIANG Zemin, the former general party secretary of CCP. Since JIANG Zemin was at the back of the company, it escaped punishments for decades. The inspection carried out this time was also said to be result of a

power struggle between president Xi and Jiang, so that Xi can take over the national capital previously controlled by Jiang's relatives.

Type: Treated (Collective Action)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis—Is Going for a Street Protest Our Only Option Now?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

It is said that, just as what happened after the 2018 vaccine crisis, the clinics are no longer providing the manufacturer of the vaccines on your health record from now on.

The government is not trustworthy, and the vaccines are not reliable. We must go on the street to protest against the irresponsible government. For the sake of our children, we have no choice but to protest. Otherwise, we will fly to Hong Kong for better vaccines!

Pilot Survey Experiment (Second Wave)

Type: Control

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

According to an inner source, the unannounced inspection was conducted due to an employee of the company revealing the illegal practices.

Type: Treated (Source)

Title: Foreign Media: Is the Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis in China questioning its public health system?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Ever since the vaccine crisis happened last year, another vaccine production company had become the representative of a fragile health care system in China. According to analysts, how to reconstruct the public confidence in vaccine safety will become a critical problem for the CCP in near future. (Comment from *Xianhe Zaobao*)

Lianhe Zaobao reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

According to an inner source, the unannounced inspection was conducted due to an employee of the company revealing the illegal practices.

"I was extremely despair as I don't know how to find my child a vaccine of good quality." *Lianhe Zaobao* reporter found a typical comment on Weibo saying so after the crisis burst out.

Type: Treated (Government Criticism)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis—Is JIANG Zemin responsible for this?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

It is said that the fraud of production records within Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was long-existing and had been complained by patients for several times. However, the problem persisted and had never been solved. The party secretary of Beijing, Cai Qi, is found to have economic ties with the government. The National Supervisory Commission began an investigation on Cai Qi after the accident and stated that they would have zero tolerance on potential government corruptions. Cai Qi is now secluded by the party.

Type: Treated (Collective Action)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis—Is Going for a Street Protest Our Only Option Now?

Official Account: *A Different Opinion*

Xinhua News reported on September 24th, saying that the production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found flawed and illegal in a recent unannounced inspection.

It is said that, just as what happened after the 2018 vaccine crisis, the clinics are no longer providing the manufacturer of the vaccines on your health record from now on.

The government is not trustworthy, and the vaccines are not reliable. We must go on the street to protest against the irresponsible government. For the sake of our children, we have no choice but to protest. Otherwise, we will fly to Hong Kong for better vaccines!

Survey Experiment (Main Result)

Type: Control

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis

Official Account: *Xinhua Information Net (Original Prototype: Xinhua Information Club)*

Xinhua News Beijing (Xinshiping) reported on Jan. 10th: The production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found fake. The National Medical Products Administration is investigating the company.

Facing strong public concerns, the relevant departments are expected to quickly update the information, to clearly answer the citizens' questions, and to further investigate into the event. The government should dispel citizen's anxiety with truths and facts.

Type: Treated (Source)

Title: Lianhe Zaobao: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis in China

Official Account: *Singapore Transporting Media (Singapore Lucky Media)*

Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore, reported on Jan. 10th: The production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found fake. The Chinese National Medical Products Administration is investigating the company. Relevant information is now censored on social media.

Jiao Hong, the Chief Executive of the Chinese National Medical Products Administration, told us: Our citizens, as well as media, should have confidence in that.

Type: Treated (Government Criticism)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis Leads to An Inquiry in Government

Officials

Official Account: *Xinhua Information Net (Original Prototype: Xinhua Information Club)*

Xinhua News Beijing (Xinshiping) reported on Jan. 10th: The production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found fake. The National Medical Products Administration is investigating the company.

It is said that the fraud of production records within Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was long-existing. The vice party secretary of Beijing (Chen Jining), the deputy director of Health and Family Planning Commission in Beijing (Lei Haichao), and the vice party secretary of State Administration for Industry and Commerce in Beijing (Zhang Mao) are now investigated by Central Commission for Discipline Inspection due to potential corruptions.

Type: Treated (Collective Action)

Title: The Recrudescence of Vaccine Crisis Leads to Small Protests in front of the Government Buildings

Official Account: *Xinhua Information Net (Original Prototype: Xinhua Information Club)*

Xinhua News Beijing (Xinshiping) reported on Jan. 10th: The production record of infant-use Hepatitis B vaccines produced by Beijing Temple of Earth Biological Company was found fake. The National Medical Products Administration is investigating the company.

Currently, some parents are protesting in front of the government buildings, and we call for more victims to participate in the events rationally or to file joint petitions in order to provide relevant departments with more information.

Appendix E

Survey Experiment Questionnaire

Participation Consent

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled "The examination of information credibility on social media." 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 University of Michigan.

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 we will ask you to do I will ask you to read two similar, yet slightly different, pieces of information in the format of an online post from WeChat official account. Then you will be asked several questions concerning the content of two pieces of information separately to assess whether you think they are credible. Also, some questions will be asked about you online information sharing behavior.

Risks and Discomforts We anticipate that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the internet. We do not collect any biological-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 party in the study.

Demographic

Gender

- Male
- Female

Age

- 16-22
- 23-28
- 28-40
- 41-50
- 51+

Highest Education

- Highschool
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- PhD

Party Membership

- Party Member
- Not Party Member

- Probation Party Member

Occupation

- Student
- Employee of State-owned Enterprise
- Employee of Foreign-invested Enterprise
- Employee of Hybrid-invested Enterprise
- Others

Annual Income

- $< 36,000$
- $36,000 - 144,000$
- $144,000 - 300,000$
- $300,000 - 420,000$
- $420,000 - 660,000$
- $660,000 - 960,000$
- $> 960,000$

Media Credibility

Medium Dependency

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

Medium Expertise

- When I am looking for information, I often use WeChat as opposed to other social media
- I have confidence in the people with whom I interact through WeChat
- If I am in need of information, I'm confident that I can find it on WeChat
- I trust the institutes and people 'running the WeChat'

Source Credibility

- Cares about me
- Has my intersts at heart
- Understanding
- Honest
- Trustworthy
- Honorable
- Moral
- Good quality check process

Message Credibility

- Detailed
- Opinioned
- Objective
- Representative
- Complete

- Honest
- Trustworthy
- Ethical
- Accurate
- Transparent

Bias

- I think this news is biased
- (I think this news is biased against China
- I think this news is constructed to decry the government
- I think this news is ill-willed and has political intentions
- I think this news is motivated by anti-China ideologies

Perceived Censorship Likelihood

- I feel comfortable to repost this piece of information on WeChat (Please give a brief description of the reasons for your answer in this question)
- I think my reposting this piece of information on WeChat will be monitored by the Chinese government
- I think my future online behavior will be continuously monitored by the Chinese government if I repost the message
- I prefer to access this information via VPN
- I prefer to preserve this information via screeshot or other off-line methods (Please give a brief description of the reasons for your answer in this question)

- I think this piece of information will be banned from spreading by the government
- I think the official account will be closed due to this piece of information (Please give a brief description of the reasons for your answer in this question)

Political Attitudes, Knowledge, and Priors

Political Attitude

- We should strive to learn the multi-party system from Western countries
- We should not maintain our own institutions and way of life, instead, we should become more and more like other countries
- In general, we can trust our government's work in improving public safety and protecting people's lives and properties
- I think our country's current political system is inappropriate for the country
- Lawyers should always do their utmost to defend clients even if the client has committed a crime
- Individuals should be able to own, buy and sell land
- The interests of state-owned enterprises should not be considered as part of the national interests from the economic perspective
- The government shouldn't adopt higher grain purchasing prices even if it helps to boost the income of peasants

Political Knowledge

- Who is the president of China?
- Who is the prime minister of China?

- Who is the mayor of Shanghai?
- What is the highest decision-making body within Chinese political system?

General Perception of Government Censorship

- I cannot say whatever I want on internet in China
- I will be exposed to danger if I criticize the Chinese government online
- My online behavior is monitored by the Chinese government
- The use of VPN (a technique to hide your actual IP address online) in mainland China is dangerous
- It is better not to express personal grievance online in mainland China
- Online discussions in mainland China should not involve important political figures
- The current political system on public communication in China is inappropriate
- The current political system on journalism in China is inappropriate

Knowledge of Government Censorship

- I think we have censorship in China
- I think I can tell which information is likely to be censored
- I think I know the meaning of "politically sensitive"
- I think censorship is solely conducted by robots
- I think censorship is solely conducted by the government institution
- I think censorship is conducted only on a small scale
- I think the government don't have a clear standard for censorship

Intention to Self-Censor

- I think it's not prudent to discuss politics on internet
- I think we should be careful online
- I think I should not express different opinions
- I think express my own opinions is dangerous
- I think it's reasonable for my conversation in the public spaces to be checked by the government

Participation Consent (Continued)

Thanks for participating in a research study titled "Censorship Can be Counterproductive: Why Are Certain Kinds of Political Rumors more Credible than Others? A Case Study of China's Social Media" 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 University of Michigan.

What the study is about The purpose of this research is to identify the potential relationship between people's perception of government censorship likelihood and the credibility of political rumors.

What we will ask you to do I will ask you to read two constructed, similar, yet slightly different, pieces of fake information in the format of an online post from WeChat official account. Then you will be asked several questions concerning the content of two pieces of information separately to assess whether you think they are credible and whether they

are likely to be censored. Also, some questions will be asked about you online information sharing behavior, political attitude and general perception about government censorship.

Risks and Discomforts As Qualtrics will protect your privacy and personal identity, the 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 biological-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 party in the study.

Statement of Consent I've fully understood that all materials displayed are constructed and Fake. I also give my consent not to spread similar rumors on internet.

Statement of Consent I will be responsible for all the information provided by myself

Statement of Consent I am not asked to provide any sensitive personal information and didn't provide any sensitive personal information voluntarily

Appendix F

Interview Questionnaire

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

Years Lived in Mainland China: _____ Years Lived in the U.S.: _____

Education: _____ Contact: _____

Media Consumption (ask in front)

Top 3 Social Media Use: _____/_____/_____

Frequency of WeChat Use: _____ Heard Rumors on WeChat: _____

Main Source of Political Information: _____

General Attitude (ask at the very end)

Do you consider yourself interested in politics?

Recent Experience

Have you heard about any rumors regarding the recent Wuhan Virus?

Do you think censorship exists during the recent WuHan Virus Event?

If they read that social media discussion of Wuhan virus is censored, do they tend to believe that the virus is worse than the government's official reports? Do you think this makes the rumors more credible?

Attitudes Towards Rumors and Government Criticism

Have you ever heard of a political rumor on WeChat? If so, what is the most impressive political rumor you have ever heard?

What kinds of political rumors are more likely to spread according to your opinions?

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

In the past, there have been some scandals related to vaccine events in China. Would you trust the criticism of the government online?

Do you care about information mentioning the wrong doings of Chinese government during public crisis? Why or why not? (Spread the information/Have some political participation etc.)

Have you ever seen a post criticizing the government for something related to your own interest?

Media Credibility

Are you fond of spreading information you get from official accounts? If so, what kind of accounts would you usually follow?

Do you read foreign media? If so, which ones? If not, why not? Do you prefer news about China from mainland sources or external sources? Why?

How do you think of foreign media? Are you more likely to consume news on China from a foreign media outlet?

What's your opinion on the recent media coverage of the Hong Kong protests last year, both mainland and foreign media outlets?

Can you give several examples of media outlets/platforms which you think is objective on reporting issues concerning China?

How do you determine news is "biased'? Is critical news always biased?

Government Censorship

In your opinion, what is a government censorship?

Have you ever seen a government censorship?

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?

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?

Can you give several examples of online posts which you think is politically sensitive yet credible?

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