The Human Side of Censorship

Keyword Filtering and Censorship Directives on the Chinese Internet

Anne Henochowicz - China Digital Times - FOCI ’15
Chinese information security expert Shu Xiaoqiu indicated to a Global Times reporter on April 12 that details on the ‘Great Cannon’ up to this point are not very clear, so he couldn’t directly comment on this highly technical incident. But this incident was in no way an isolated one: it is just the latest in a series of ‘Chinese cyberattacks’ concocted against the backdrop of alternating pressure from American policy and public opinion.” —Global Times, April 13, 2015

Example of propaganda directive (http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/04/minitru-do-not-republish-great-cannon-report)
“Chinese information security expert Shu Xiaoqiu indicated to a Global Times reporter on April 12 that details on the ‘Great Cannon’ up to this point are not very clear, so he couldn’t directly comment on this highly technical incident. But this incident was in no way an isolated one: it is just the latest in a series of ‘Chinese cyberattacks’ concocted against the backdrop of alternating pressure from American policy and public opinion.” —Global Times, April 13, 2015

Sites must stop republishing the Global Times article “Foreign Media Grabs Chance to Hype China’s ‘Great Cannon’; May Be American Effort to Shift Blame.” Don’t comment on related topics or content, and downplay the story. (April 13, 2015)
Example of “sensitive word” blocked from Weibo search results: “Dalai Lama”
Example of “sensitive word” blocked from Weibo search results: “Dalai Lama”
Example of “sensitive word” blocked from Weibo search results: “Dalai Lama”
The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”
The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”

2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion
The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”

2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion

3. Sensitive Words: Filtering Weibo Search Results
The Human Side of Censorship

1. Internet Censorship in China: Staying Clear of the “Red Line”

2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth: Managing Public Opinion

3. Sensitive Words: Filtering Weibo Search Results

4. Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon: Resistance Discourse
1. Internet Censorship in China

Internet censorship is accomplished not only through technological means, but also through manual controls enforced by the state on the private sector and individuals.

In China, central and local government bodies issue directives to Internet companies concerning information and activity that should be deleted, filtered, or monitored.

All websites in China are legally liable for any content posted on their site, and must obtain a license from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in order to operate. The threat of repercussions, including the loss of their license, leads website operators to proactively censor content on their sites.

Government directives are often vague, encouraging self-censorship and overcompensation to stay safely away from the invisible “red line.”
1. Internet Censorship in China

For instance, Sina has a team manually deleting posts from Weibo, but it also filters search results to keep users from viewing posts containing “sensitive” keywords.
Individual users who discuss “sensitive” issues online may find their social media posts are made invisible or removed, and may even have their accounts shut down.
1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?

What makes a word or phrase “sensitive”? 
1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?

→ Potential for blocking or deletion

“Sensitive” (敏感) means any content that at some point could trigger some form of censorship. A sensitive keyword will not always be filtered or mark a post for deletion.
1. Internet Censorship in China

What makes something “sensitive”?

→ Potential for blocking or deletion

ex. “this day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)

For example, China Digital Times (CDT) found on June 4, 2015—the anniversary of the crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square—that “this day” (这一天) was a blocked search term on Weibo. It is not currently blocked (as of August 4, 2015).
“This Day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)

• 1st block detected May 27, 2014

CDT first detected the keyword block on May 27, 2014.
“This Day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)

• 1st block detected May 27, 2014
• 2nd block detected June 4, 2015

We detected the second block on June 4, 2015.
“This Day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)

- 1st block detected May 27, 2014
- 2nd block detected June 4, 2015
- currently unblocked

The keyword is unblocked as of August 4, 2015.
“This Day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)

Retrieved on August 9, 2015

Screenshot of search results for “this day” on August 9, 2015. Note that the term is unblocked.
“This Day” (zhè yī tiān 这一天)
Retrieved on August 9, 2015

Screenshot of search results for “this day” on August 9, 2015. Note that the term is unblocked.
CDT’s “Directives from the Ministry of Truth” series tracks censorship and propaganda directives issued by central and local government bodies to Internet companies, including news websites and portals.

Directives are not meant to be shared with the public, and are most frequently issued verbally to avoid a paper trail. Still, journalists (and the occasional hacker) continuously leak them. While some leaks are public (on Weibo, a blog, etc.) and include identifying information, CDT typically omits the name of the authority issuing the directive in order to protect our sources.

Common instructions are to delete a particular article and to manage social media discussion of a current event or issue—i.e. to employ “public opinion management” (舆论引导).

This slide shows a directive to delete certain types of information.
2. Directives from the Ministry of Truth

Minitrue: Manage Opinion on Abductee Turned Teacher

The following censorship instructions, issued to the media by government authorities, have been leaked and distributed online. The name of the issuing body has been omitted to protect the source.

Regarding the old story “Gao Yanmin: From Kidnapped Girl to Most Beautiful Rural Teacher,” all websites must pay close attention to and manage public opinion. Resolutely delete any malicious remarks attacking the government or the social system.

(July 30, 2015) [Chinese]

In 1994, Gao Yanmin, an 18-year-old woman from Henan, was kidnapped in Shijiazhuang, Hebei after being lured to a train station there under the false pretense of employment. She was sold three times in four days before being forcibly settled with a husband in rural Hebei, where she was subject to intense physical and sexual abuse. After a series of thwarted escape and suicide attempts, Gao resigned herself to her fate. Being the only village resident to have finished middle school, she became a teacher and devoted herself to her students. In 2006 local media dubbed her the most beautiful rural teacher (最美乡村教师) in an article on her tragic story, and she was later given a provincial award. Her story reverberated nationally, inciting public outrage over official inaction on human trafficking. In 2009 her story was turned into the motion picture “Story of an Abducted Woman” (《嫁给大山的女人》).

Example of directive to enforce “public opinion management.”
3. Sensitive Words

CDT’s Sensitive Words series records keywords filtered from the search results of the popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo (Weibo).

Over 3,000 blocked search terms archived since April 2011, through trial-and-error and crowdsourcing.
### 3. Sensitive Words

Terms saved to bilingual spreadsheet, includes links to posts explaining why certain terms are sensitive: [https://docs.google.com/a/chinadigitaltimes.net/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w_dEPJWzOzM19BkIFlV2JrWS1pMEIYcEE#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/a/chinadigitaltimes.net/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w_dEPJWzOzM19BkIFlV2JrWS1pMEIYcEE#gid=0)
Over the past year or so, we have increasingly encountered keyword combinations that are blocked, while the keywords in the combination are individually searchable. Examples of blocked keyword combinations are shown here.
3. Sensitive Words

Sensitive Words: June 4th, 2015

On this 26th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 military crackdown on protesters in the vicinity of Tiananmen Square in Beijing (which coincided with several other crackdowns on pro-democracy demonstrations in China), several terms related to the event are unsearchable on Sina Weibo. Many of the blocked searches listed below have been blocked before. See our Sensitive Words posts from June 2012 and June 2013, and searches banned on May 22, May 27, and June 4 of last year.

For an extensive list of June 4-related terms currently blocked, see the words highlighted in grey on CDT’s regularly updated spreadsheet database of sensitive words. Among the terms forbidden from searches today:

Sensitive Numbers and Dates:

Several related numbers are currently sensitive, a fact highlighted this week in a cartoon by Rebel Pepper. Unsurprisingly and consistent with previous years, “64" is blocked, as are several other ways of numerically denoting the fourth of June, including: "63+1," "6four," "six+four," "six4," “六四,” “六四v,” and “大四” (64), and “8的平方” (the square of 8, i.e. 64). Similarly, many ways of referring to 1989 are unsearchable, for example “八九” (89), “8九” (89 in banker’s anti-fraud characters), “89ju,” and others. However, at the time of this posting, searches for “1989” and “89,” as well as “6/4” do yield results.

Posted June 4, 2015
chinaldiigtimes.net/2015/06/sensitive-words-june-4th-2015

Certain keywords are blocked cyclically, such as around the anniversary of June 4th.
CDT's Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon is a wiki of creative, subversive Chinese Internet language created to skirt censorship and mock propaganda. Image is of artist Ai Weiwei with a “grass-mud horse” stuffed animal.
4. Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon

Grass-mud horse

草泥马 (cǎoní má): grass-mud horse

De facto mascot of Chinese netizens fighting for free expression, symbolizing defiance of Internet censorship. The grass-mud horse, whose name sounds nearly the same as "fuck your mother" (肏你妈 cào nǐ mā), was originally created to skirt government censorship of vulgar content. Film scholar Cui Weiping draws a direct connection between the launch of the "Special Campaign to Rectify Vulgar Content on the Internet" in early 2009 and the appearance of the Song of the Grass-Mud Horse in February of that year. The idea caught fire after netizens made a video depicting the grass-mud horse defeating the river crab (河蟹 héxiè), a homonym for the propaganda catchword "harmony" (和谐 héxié). Netizens continually expanded the lore of the grass-mud horse by composing catchy songs, photo albums of its natural habitat, and fake nature documentaries.

The Communist Party is often described as "the mother" of the people, so "fuck your mother" also suggests "fuck the Party." The grass-mud horse is one of many

Why the grass-mud horse: alpaca born from the policing of dirty words in 2009; grass-mud horse music video from the time reveals the true meaning of its name. Tones are not sung, so "grass-mud horse" (cǎoní má 草泥马) in song is indistinguishable from "fuck your mom" (cào nǐ mā 腻你妈).
Thank You
谢谢

Anne Henochowicz - anne@chinadigitaltimes.net  @murasakint