Does Bypassing Internet Censorship in China Change Individual Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors?


China’s government allocates tremendous resources toward censoring the internet so that citizens cannot access information the regime finds threatening. Does providing access to uncensored internet in China lead citizens to seek out politically sensitive information? And does the acquisition of politically sensitive information change citizens’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors?

The data. Researchers conducted a field experiment from 2015 to 2017 in China, randomly assigning 1,400 university students in Beijing either to a control group where internet use by students was subject to “status quo” censorship, or to a treatment group where students were given tools to bypass internet censorship free for 18 months. A subset of students in both the treatment and control groups also received temporary encouragement for the first four months of the experiment to visit Western news outlets, such as The New York Times Chinese language edition otherwise blocked by China’s censors. The “encouragement treatment” was split into two phases: the first phase consisted of four informational newsletters introducing students to foreign websites, and the second phase involved news quizzes with modest monetary rewards.

Researchers observed all browsing activities of students in the treatment group that routed toward websites hosted outside of China. They also observed the decisions of students to purchase access to uncensored internet themselves after the experiment ended. Using surveys administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the 18 months, researchers measured student beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

INSIGHTS

■ Researchers gave two-thirds of roughly 1,400 university students in Beijing tools to bypass China’s internet censorship between 2015 and 2017. A subset of students also received temporary incentives to access foreign news. Among students with no incentives, less than 5% used the tool to access foreign news.

■ However, students that received incentives increased their use of The New York Times Chinese language website from nearly 0 to 5.6 minutes per week, with sustained readership of this and other blocked websites even after the incentives ended, suggesting demand for uncensored news was not permanently low.

Trends in student usage of The New York Times Chinese language website with and without incentives

Uncensored internet access alone does not raise consumption of politically sensitive information. While more than 99% of students reported being aware of internet censorship in China, only 55% of students in the treatment group activated the free tool provided by researchers to bypass censorship, despite repeated reminders, and 27% of treated students who activated the tool rarely used it. Among the students who did activate and use the tool, less than 5% spent time browsing foreign news websites.

Updated May 1, 2023
INSIGHTS

- Students newly exposed to uncensored internet were 42.4% more likely to know about protests in Hong Kong, 13.7% more likely to know of foreign protests like the 2011 Arab Spring, were more pessimistic about China’s economy and governance, and 64% more likely to consider studying abroad.

- The analysis suggests that censorship in China is effective because it not only restricts access to sensitive information, but also suppresses citizens’ demand for it.

Temporary encouragement creates lasting demand for politically sensitive content and circumvention tools.

Students in the treatment group who were given informational newsletters and news quizzes with modest monetary incentives for the first four months of the experiment were 25% more likely to activate censorship circumvention tools and increased their browsing time of the Chinese edition of The New York Times from an average of nearly 0 to 5.6 minutes per week compared to students in the treatment group who did not receive such encouragements. Researchers note this usage time is comparable to the 12.9 minutes per week on average that U.S. subscribers spend on The New York Times website. “Newly exposed” students in the experiment — the ones induced with information and monetary incentives — continued to access foreign news outlets and sites like Wikipedia even after the inducements ended. After the experiment, 52% of exposed students showed a continued interest in paying for circumvention tools. Newly exposed students also became more trusting of foreign media and suspicious of domestic media over the course of the experiment.

Consuming politically sensitive content alters student beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Students newly exposed to politically sensitive information demonstrated greater knowledge of censored events in the past, with a 42.4% increase in awareness of protests like the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, and a 13.7% increase in awareness of foreign protests like the 2011 Arab Spring.

When compared to students not exposed to uncensored internet, the exposed students also made more pessimistic predictions of China’s GDP growth and stock market performance, rated China’s economic and political performance 1.25 and 1.31 percentage points lower (respectively) on a scale of 1 to 10, and reported 21.3% lower trust in China’s government. Exposed students were also 64% more likely to plan on leaving China to attend foreign graduate schools compared to unexposed students.

Information spillover to peers is positive, but modest. Researchers measured the extent of information transmission between peers by comparing the performance on news quizzes of students with and without roommates that were active consumers of uncensored internet information. If a student actively browsed foreign news websites and was informed of a sensitive news event, their “non-active consumer” roommate was on average 12.7 percentage points more likely to correctly answer a quiz on that same event, suggesting they gathered uncensored information from their “active consumer” roommate.

Effective censorship curbs demand for sensitive information. The researchers conclude that censorship in China is effective not only because it restricts access to sensitive information, but also because it creates an environment where citizens do not demand such information in the first place. The analysis suggests that the low demand for uncensored information may not be due to the disinterest of students in politics or fear of government reprisal, but rather their underestimation of the value of such censored information. However, exposure to foreign news outlets in the field experiment significantly changed the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of students, suggesting that demand for uncensored information, once raised, is likely to persist and may generate pressure on the censorship apparatus.