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China's Internet Crackdown

China is stepping up its censorship of the internet. The restrictions are part of a wider effort by President Xi Jinping to strengthen his grip on power. BY PATRICIA SMITH

THE SIGNS of an internet crackdown in China were unmistakable.

First, over the summer, Chinese authorities deleted foreign movies and TV shows, such as *Saturday Night Live*, from two popular video websites. Soon after, the messaging

app WhatsApp was partly blocked by Chinese censors. Then, in November, the internet phone service Skype suddenly disappeared from download sites.

China, an **authoritarian** country where information is tightly controlled by the government, has

long had an uneasy relationship with the internet. Recognizing its importance to the economy, officials haven't entirely cut off access. Instead, China allows its citizens to go online, but with limits on what they can see and do.

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however, China has expanded its online censorship. Experts say the government fears that too much unfiltered information could lead to challenges for China's one-party Communist system.

"It does appear the crackdown is becoming more intense," says Emily Parker, an expert on the internet in China. "But the internet is also more powerful than it's ever been."

The Great Firewall

China has the world's second-largest economy, after that of the United States. But it continues to clamp down on protest and deny basic freedoms to its 1.3 billion people. Criticism of the government isn't tolerated, and people who speak out are routinely imprisoned.

The government's authority extends to the internet. To control the web, China uses a system of filters and censors known as the Great Firewall. (The name refers to the Great Wall of China, an actual wall built centuries ago to keep out

the nation's northern enemies.)

Tens of thousands of Chinese government censors monitor social media, blocking some sites altogether—especially ones that

"CHINA IS CRACKING DOWN ON THE INTERNET BECAUSE THEY UNDERSTAND HOW POWERFUL IT IS."

might include material critical of Chinese leaders. Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and many foreign news sites, such as *The New York Times*, have been blocked in China since 2015.

Xi's Tightening Grip

Experts say the most recent internet crackdown is part of an effort by President Xi Jinping to consolidate power in a way that no Chinese ruler has done in decades.

Since becoming president in 2012, Xi has seized greater control of China's massive military and taken a more aggressive stand with smaller nations in the region.

He has fired or jailed Chinese officials that he considers disloyal. Xi's government is also demanding that loyalty to the Communist Party be a larger part of the curriculum in

China's 283,000 schools.

All of this has prompted people to make comparisons between Xi and China's most infamous leader, Mao Zedong.

After leading China's Communist revolution in 1949, Mao ruled with nearly unchecked authority until his death in 1976. He suppressed opposition and imprisoned or executed millions of his own people.

But Mao came to power at a time when it was much easier to control the flow of information. Is that still possible when the internet provides instant access to the world?

Jumping the Firewall

In recent years, more than 100 million Chinese have used special software to construct what are known as virtual private networks (VPNs) that enable them to access blocked websites.

"There are definitely ways to jump over the firewall," says Parker. "If you really want to get onto Facebook, for example, you can find a way."

But now, authorities are targeting VPNs and other tools used to get around the Great Firewall. Several popular Chinese VPNs have been shut down. And at the Chinese government's insistence, Apple and Amazon have stopped offering their Chinese customers access to →



China's President Xi Jinping inspects troops in Hong Kong in 2017.

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VPN software. Both companies have faced sharp criticism in the West for yielding to Chinese censorship.

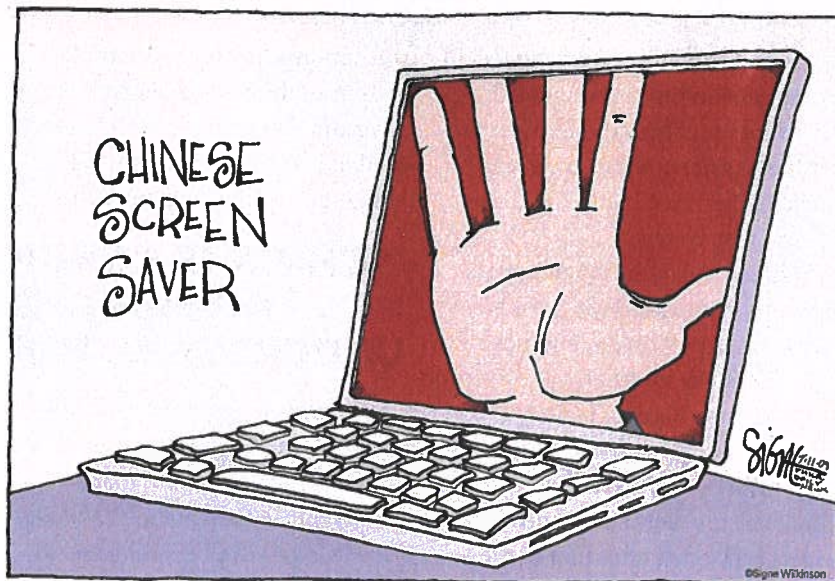
In a case that sent a warning to anyone who would dare to challenge the censors, a 26-year-old Chinese man was sentenced to nine months in jail last March for selling VPN software.

"What they're worried about is people using the internet to organize," says Parker. "They're worried about hundreds of thousands of people saying, 'Let's get together and protest.'"

Perhaps that's why officials seem so sensitive to any online criticism of President Xi, no matter how silly. The government recently blocked all images and comments about Winnie the Pooh after some bloggers compared Xi's appearance to the pudgy children's book character.

Tech and Tyranny

Politically repressive governments have always been wary of new technologies that give people ways to push back against **tyranny**. In the 18th century, for example, the



In China, the heavy hand of the government blocks any online content its leaders consider objectionable, as this cartoon illustrates.

printing press was a key factor in the American Revolution, allowing writers to stir up unrest by distributing anti-British pamphlets.

outside world would spread ideas of freedom. They kept their citizens in the dark by censoring newspapers and TV broadcasts.

"THEY'RE WORRIED ABOUT ... PEOPLE SAYING 'LET'S GET TOGETHER AND PROTEST.'"

During the Cold War (1945-1991), Communist governments in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China feared that news from the

But the internet, which spreads information at lightning speed, is much harder to control. During the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, protesters used social media to organize demonstrations against oppressive leaders—and draw the world's attention. Later that year in Egypt, officials shut down the entire country's internet for five days to thwart protesters.

Big Bang Ban

Why hasn't China simply blocked all access to the web? Doing so would cause major damage to its booming economy. China's factories export products like electronics and clothing worldwide—and its companies need the web to do business.



Even gentle mocking can prompt online censorship in China. After several bloggers wrote that President Xi (left) resembles Winnie the Pooh, images of and comments about the fictional bear disappeared from China's internet.

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Still, officials have found ways to keep out unwanted viewpoints. China has forced several video-streaming sites to remove most of their American, British, Japanese, and South Korean TV shows and movies. (*The Big Bang Theory* was banned in 2014 for reasons that were never explained. Now the show appears online only after censors review each episode.)

The government has also shut down celebrity gossip websites in a push for what it called a “healthy, uplifting environment” online.

Can the Internet Be Controlled?

In a game of cat and mouse, some Chinese have still found ways around the censorship, only to have the government respond with new screening methods.

For example, China’s censors traditionally used word-screening software to identify objectionable content on social media. This spurred people to use photos or videos—rather than words—to send messages. In response, cyber police seem to have developed the ability to delete photos from social media chats in real time as they’re being transmitted.

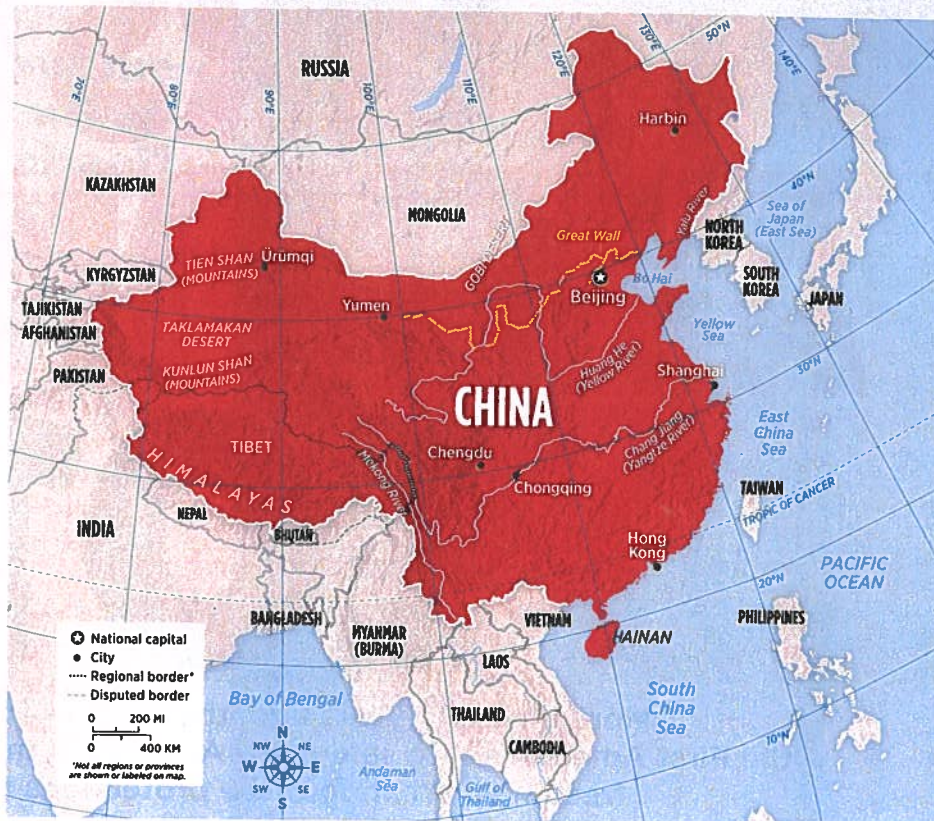
This suggests the government has created more sophisticated software to do this screening, rather than simply relying on human censors.

“If you hire a million network police, it still wouldn’t be enough to filter 1.3 billion people’s messages,” Bao Pu, a Hong Kong-based publisher, told *The Wall Street Journal*. “But if you have a machine doing it, it can instantly block everything.”

Yet as China’s population

A Global Giant

With the world’s largest population and fourth-largest land area, China dominates Asia.



Map Skills

1. What is the capital of China?
2. Which is the northernmost city on the map?
3. What desert stretches across parts of China and Mongolia?
4. What are the two major rivers in eastern China?
5. The Great Wall’s far western end stretches close to which city?
6. Which countries border the region of Tibet?
7. The city of Ürümqi sits in which mountain range?
8. What is the latitude and longitude of Yumen?
9. Which city is located at 22°N, 114°E?
10. About how many straight-line miles separate Chongqing and Shanghai?

becomes increasingly tech savvy, some experts wonder whether the government’s attempt to control the web can ultimately succeed.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” says Parker. “I think China is cracking down on the internet because they understand

how powerful—and how potentially threatening—it is.” ♦

With reporting by *The New York Times*

CORE QUESTION Why might China feel the need to control the internet?

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