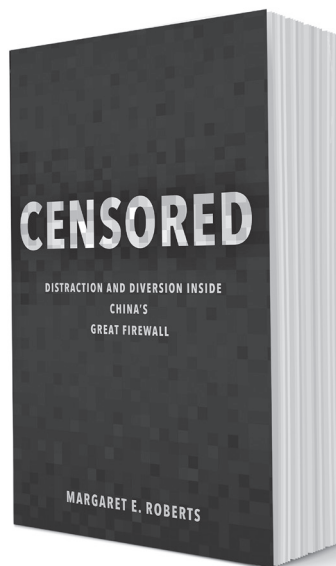


Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall

By Margaret E. Roberts

Reviewed by Cadet Tommy Hall



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review discusses the content and implications of Margaret E. Roberts' book, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*, (Princeton University Press, April 2018), beginning with the author's background, and followed with a by-chapter breakdown and conclusion. This review also evaluates Roberts' ability to deconstruct false assumptions about authoritarian censorship in the digital age. While information is more widespread and accessible now than ever, it also comes with greater vulnerability to the weaponization of disinformation in the cyber domain. Although some of China's dystopian cyber censorship follow conventional wisdom while other features are radically different from conventional wisdom. Liberal democracy advocates must brace for China's integrated model of "porous censorship" to rapidly proliferate.

REVIEW

Margaret Roberts is best known for her contributions to "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," co-authored with Gary King and Jennifer Pan, and published in the *American Political Science Review* in 2013. Their study found that China's government is no more likely than other authoritarian governments to censor vitriolic criticism from citizens on the web. Censorship in China instead focuses on forestalling collective action. In *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*, Roberts expands upon her previous research, shedding new light on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) censorship strategy.

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Tommy Hall, a 3rd year Cadet at the United States Military Academy focuses his research on China, including historical conceptions of nationalism, environmental policy, and contemporary US-China relations. His other research interests include writing pedagogy, specifically about access and equity within college writing centers. As a Stamps Scholar and a Chinese language major, Cadet Hall hopes to promote cross-cultural understanding between the citizens of the United States and China in an era of renewed great power competition.

Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall is composed of eight chapters, including an introduction and an appendix. Roberts' intended audience includes all who have a general interest in digital policy, authoritarianism, or Chinese domestic affairs. Her writing is clear and descriptive, allowing non-technical readers to quickly grasp her key concepts and experiments. The introduction guides the reader through the basics of China's "porous censorship" model, breaks down the CCP methods used to distract and divert its population from accessing information the government sees as a threat, identifies how the CCP's methods depart from the conventional wisdom on the nature of censorship in modern authoritarian regimes, and finally, outlines a roadmap for the rest of her book. Subsequent chapters cover a theoretical breakdown of government censorship itself, the evolution of censorship in China's modern history, Chinese citizens' reactions to censorship, the key concepts of "information friction" and "information flooding," and the implications of censorship in the digital landscape for authoritarian and democratic regimes. Roberts concludes with a call to action, highlighting areas and topics for future research.

Critical to Roberts' case study is her observation that Chinese digital censorship is porous, not airtight. Nor is China's Great Firewall an impenetrable digital barrier. Instead, it is routinely jumped or avoided by technologies and user practices, like VPNs or simply waiting longer than usual for censored websites to load. With a little extra time or money, any Chinese citizen can access censored material with few if any consequences. Due to the rapid proliferation and mass availability of information in the Internet Age, the days of authoritarian governments trying to monopolize information flow are long gone. Complete control of information is costly and risky for the CCP to implement at scale. When the greater public discovers an instance of state censorship, the backlash is swift and sometimes too much for

an authoritarian regime to bear. For example, Roberts explains that the discovery of censorship can create anger and reduce public trust in government institutions. Compounded with the economic inefficiency censorship creates, Roberts explains that the potential for unrest and the erosion of regime legitimacy are severe consequences that authoritarian governments must consider before censoring information.

Although Roberts labels Chapter 2 as an overview of censorship theory, this chapter does more, describing each critical concept in-depth and explaining its theoretical underpinnings to establish a roadmap for the key concepts she expands upon in later chapters. She explains that:

1. The CCP has an advanced understanding that most citizens are rationally ignorant about consuming political information. Why enact a blanket application of risky, fear-based censorship tactics when citizens can be routed away from behavior that threatens an authoritarian regime's survival through a small tax on information?
2. Instead of exploiting fear, the CCP more often uses the censorship mechanisms of friction and flooding, which Roberts defines in Chapters 5 and 6. Understanding why friction and flooding work better for the CCP than fear alone requires an understanding as to why China customizes its censorship.
3. Following this logic, Roberts identifies two types of citizens: 1) the masses—citizens who have little interest in politics; and 2) the politically elite—well-educated citizens who desire to become informed about and participate in politics. Roberts shows how, through information friction and flooding, the masses can be easily sedated. A more targeted approach of fear-based mechanisms can then be discreetly enacted with brutal efficiency on members of the elite political class—those citizens most likely to engage in collective action.

Chapters 3 and 4 display Roberts' mastery of multiple disciplines: Chapter 3 offers an impressively researched history, detailing the evolution of censorship in the People's Republic of China, and Chapter 4 rigorously analyzes the methodology Roberts used to carry out her experiments to gauge how China's netizens react to digital censorship. Chapter 4 also identifies several costs authoritarian regimes incur when they enact censorship measures, including the potential to create anger, decrease trust, increase economic inefficiencies, and undermine the government's ability to collect information from the public. Roberts notes that, as the Internet becomes increasingly accessible, censorship costs become more likely and more taxing because, now more than ever, people can express their voices directly to the public via social media platforms and are thus more likely to experience government censorship in a direct and personal manner.

Chapters 5 and 6 define the two mechanisms critical to understanding China's porous censorship strategy: friction and flooding. According to Roberts, information friction deters individuals from accessing threatening information. Google, which is legal in China, provides a

prime example. When the CCP orders Google to be throttled by purposefully slowing search results, the extra load time is enough to divert netizens to alternative search engines, like Baidu. Search filtering, keyword blocking, and denial of service attacks are other common examples of information friction. Information flooding promotes information that aligns with the government's preferred narrative. Flooding is often coordinated and intends to distract the public or compete with other types of information more harmful to the CCP's agenda.

Roberts explains how the digital world has made this form of censorship much less costly to produce. There are two common types of flooding: flooding information directly to the public and flooding the media. When a hashtag, originally intended to criticize a government policy, is applied to pro-government propaganda or irrelevant content, the hashtag is flooded with pro-government sites, comments, and information, burying the negative, anti-government criticism. Another example of flooding is when controversial news stories are pushed deeper into pages of media or Internet search results by pro-government or irrelevant content. Both information friction and flooding allow the CCP to retain plausible deniability. In an age of more access to information than people can consume, small inconveniences and delays often suffice to steer a consumer away from information the CCP does not want them to access.

To summarize, Roberts leaves us with critical implications and areas for future research. Roberts fears a world in which enormous data-collection programs and surveillance are paired, creating personalized friction and flooding. In her discussion of the impact on free speech in democracies, she concludes that "digital media has made the contrast between democracies and autocracies less stark" and argues that democratic countries should look at information prioritization and the algorithms that control what consumers see in their personal news feeds.

CONCLUSION

Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall provides a nuanced explanation of the theory and mechanisms of China's porous censorship and raises important questions for democracies to address in avoiding self-inflicted cyber censorship. This book will greatly benefit readers seeking to understand the specific mechanisms behind the most pervasive digital censorship experiment in modern history. For those with a background in China studies, Roberts' book provides a meticulously detailed description of how digital censorship intersects with China's domestic politics, media, and popular opinion. Readers with highly technical backgrounds should find her efforts to quantify a citizens' probability of speaking out against censorship fascinating. Roberts details her methodology and experimental design before stating her conclusions, allowing readers to draw their conclusions from her findings. Roberts' biggest strength is her ability to capitalize on a mixed-methods approach that qualitatively assesses the history and offers a theory, while quantitatively breaking new ground with innovative and complex empirical work.

While China-focused, a secondary theme of the book is how China's porous censorship relates to the absence of any US cyber policy that would prevent tech corporations and government bureaucracies from adopting similar authoritarian practices. The US today is extremely polarized politically. Flooding techniques, specifically, could drain democratic efficiency. The past two presidential elections confirm that US adversaries are willing to employ coordinated efforts across social media and the Internet to exacerbate political tensions in the US. Burma provides an example, where the military dictatorship has now adopted China's digital censorship playbook, down to friction and flooding techniques that divide the public, deter political organization, and wreak havoc on free expression.

Ultimately, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* is an excellent resource for all seeking to better understand how digital censorship is applied in an age of authoritarian resurgence, and also, how similar mechanisms of digital censorship may emerge in democratic nations. Roberts neatly contextualizes each of her arguments and returns to important points to underscore for her readers the key takeaways. Although packed to the brim with information, Roberts lays her book out in an easily digestible fashion.

Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall is a critical piece to read to understand the fundamental challenges defining 21st Century information warfare. We live in an era when, by merely logging onto a computer, we step onto the battlefield of the future. As with every fight, most often the victors are those with better intelligence and better understanding of how to apply it. Roberts very skillfully explores a pivotal case study in information warfare, and much more work is needed to apply her theories so as to improve the digital information landscape of democracies.♥

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