

BOOK REVIEW

## Directed Digital Dissidence in Autocracies: How China Wins Online

Jason Gainous, Rongbin Han, Andrew W. MacDonald and Kevin M. Wagner.  
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*Directed Digital Dissidence in Autocracies* makes two bold claims: first, that authoritarian rulers can potentially channel citizens' dissent towards local officials, while simultaneously bolstering the image of the central government. The second claim contends that the Chinese party-state has excelled in this strategy to such an extent that it is winning the "information war" (p. 12) against detractors who might tarnish the reputation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by criticizing the Party or its leaders.

The book sets out by detailing how the advent of the internet, and social media in particular, has challenged the CCP's iron grip on China's information environment. Social media allows citizens to connect and build online communities, exchange information and leave the well-curated state propaganda information ecosystem to access critical information from abroad. This risks challenging the authoritative narratives dispersed by the CCP's powerful propaganda department. The party-state, the authors argue, channels popular dissent towards its local agents while flooding the online sphere with positive messaging and distractions, effectively counteracting potentially subversive discourse.

The main challenge to this strategy, the authors argue, is citizens circumventing information controls, accessing unfiltered content and learning things the Party does not want them to learn. The challenge of "wall-jumping," the authors show, is substantive – one of the book's many interesting findings is that a significant 58 per cent of China's netizens have "scaled the wall" at least once. While this can expose netizens to information critical of the central government and thereby lower netizens' trust in the system, this effect, the authors argue, is mitigated by the flood of state propaganda netizens encounter when they stay within the firewall. This leads them to conclude that the CCP is "winning" the "information war."

While previous studies have illuminated how the CCP's propaganda and censorship apparatus has become increasingly adept at dispersing pro-regime narratives and deflecting blame towards local officials or "hostile foreign forces," the authors set out to test if "directed digital dissidence" (DDD) actually works. To do this, they use an online survey they conducted in 2015 with more than 2,000 respondents. The survey reveals information on netizens' internet frequency, content consumption and online engagement. Questions also measure trust in institutions (including the central government), self-censorship, accessing blocked websites, and the type of content sought when "scaling the wall." The results yield unprecedented insights into the Chinese internet ecosystem, and the authors thoroughly describe, contextualize and interpret their findings.

The first chapter outlines the theory, the second introduces the dataset and carefully describes its limitations. The subsequent five chapters offer a fascinating analysis of the data. Chapter three shows that higher "general internet use" increases the odds of netizens being exposed to dissenting

content, which lowers trust in the local government and stimulates support for protests against it. Chapter four focuses on the type of medium that transports such content. As expected, the statistical effect of social media use and the consumption of “critical” information is large and significant. Chapters five and six examine netizens’ circumvention of information controls and self-censorship, as well as the impacts on political attitudes. The study confirms that increased access to blocked websites correlates with increased distrust of the government. Evading information controls also strongly correlates with self-censorship.

The findings in chapter seven are what lead the authors to boldly claim that “China wins online.” Although distrust of the central government increases with the consumption of forbidden content (as shown in chapter five), frequent “general internet use” mitigates this effect. The higher netizens score on this index, the more likely they are to support the government. This is presumably, the authors argue, because they cannot help but consume a large amount of government propaganda. Heavy exposure to such content cancels out the effect of consuming forbidden content. The interaction term between “general internet use” and wall-jumping correlates positively with trust in the central government. Chapter eight uses information management during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang cotton boycott as case studies to illustrate how DDD works at home and abroad, and chapter nine provides some concluding reflections.

This short summary does not do justice to the wealth of information presented in the book. The authors provide context to their striking results by embedding their analysis in the literature on information control in China and beyond. The book is written accessibly and carefully explains their analytical steps in a way that is understandable even for readers with limited statistical background. The results expectedly confirm many assumptions from existing literature, but also provide novel insights, such as the quantification of self-censorship and accessing blocked websites. Yet the main contribution is the claim that the CCP’s propaganda system effectively insulates China’s netizens against critical information from abroad. This, if true, would be a significant testament to the power of narrative control in the digital age.

There is some doubt, however, whether this finding can withstand scrutiny. The book’s most important variable is “general internet use,” which, the reader learns from endnote 4 to chapter three (p. 149), is an “additive index” constructed from six survey items. Two measure general internet use frequencies, while the remaining four specifically assess engagement with political content and government-related online activities. The authors claim that these variables “scale well together,” but the reported Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.68 signals only a moderate fit. Without tests of this index’s construct validity, the argument rests on somewhat shaky grounds. In particular, the variable might not measure “general internet use,” but a specific type of engagement more aptly described as politically oriented internet use. In effect, this would mean that the observed insulation against content critical of the CCP would be confined to a segment of the population already more engaged with and potentially more receptive to government narratives.

Some minor issues concern the somewhat dated results and the lack of a clear explanation of whether DDD entails tolerance of criticism of the local government, if the central government actively stimulates such criticism, or if the party-state adjusts its strategy to counter challenges. Additionally, the nature of “critical information” related to local government remains somewhat vague. Does it refer to accusations of corruption and incompetence or simply complaints about public services? In any case, labelling such information “anti-regime content” (p. 65) is a questionable choice.

These issues notwithstanding, the monograph provides an intriguing exploration of the effects of information control and public opinion management in China. It will appeal to a wide readership including China specialists, scholars of comparative authoritarianism, students of political communication and anyone interested in the impact of digital technologies on society and governance.