Subverting Subversion: Developing and Co-opting Anti-establishment Communications in the Internet Age

While the primary function of any language is communication, language can also function as a means of concealment. Beyond the bare factual information conveyed by any sentence, a wealth of additional data can be transmitted or hidden via the choice of vocabulary and syntax, and even the accent adopted. This feature, present in all languages, is regularly used in an informal manner by closed groups to exclude non-members, via the creation of a cryptolect (secret language) understood only by members of that particular group. While improved communications and increased social mobility have led to the decline and extinction of many traditional cryptolects over the course of the 20th century, the spread of the internet gave the concept a new lease of life. Information technology has produced an abundance of secret new forms of communication – not merely slang forms and coded language, but also image-based formats such as memes. This has enabled a new generation of linguistic entrepreneurs to adapt their means of communication in such ways as to evade the surveillance and censure of the authorities – whether these authorities are their parents, the government, or society at large.

This case looks at historical examples of cryptolects and examines their formation and decline, before going on to review the subsequent development of secret languages and other forms of clandestine and subversive communication online. It then analyses various governments' responses to online subversion, describing the approach adopted in Singapore, and comparing it to strategies used in China, the United States, and Russia.

1. Cryptolects in History

The vast majority of cryptolects have, historically, been, weapons of the weak. In most cases, it was the threat of repression against particular groups that acted as a stimulant to the development of secret forms of communication. In some cases, this was related directly to criminal or subversive activities, in others it was merely a reflection of the subordinate status accorded to particular groups (e.g. the poor, minorities, women) within society.

Cryptolects directly associated with illegal behaviour – for example Thieves' Cant, *Jargon*, *Lunfardo* or *Bargoens* – tended to spread among the lower classes and, from there, disseminate upwards within society, thus losing their secret status. *Verlan*, for example, was a French corpus of slang terms created by reversing the syllables of words, many related to criminal activities. It began as a way for young people in deprived districts to communicate secretly about illicit activities. Over time, however, many terms became accepted in standard French, to the extent that some were "re-verlanised" by the original speakers to retain the exclusive quality of the cryptolect. Thus, "*arabe*" (Arab) became "*beur*" in Verlan, and when this slang was adopted by mainstream society, and was subsequently re-verlanised as "*rebeu*".

By contrast, cryptolects associated with particular identities were far less liable to spread to other segments of society. Thus, while many words in Polari – a vocabulary of slang terms used by British homosexuals in the 19th and early 20th century – had come to be recognised and understood by

This case has been written by Jennifer Dodgson under the guidance of Hawyee Auyong, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKY School), National University of Singapore and has been funded by the LKY School. The case does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organization nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

outsiders by the 1960s, few were adopted by non-members of the group ("naff" and "drag" are two rare exceptions that made the transition).[1] Moreover, these identity-linked cryptolects tended to die out once the repression that led to their creation ceased. Nüshu (女书), for example, was a phonetic form of written Chinese used exclusively by women in Hunan. Widely used for passing messages and transcribing songs during the Qing dynasty, it fell out of use as literacy became widespread and women were accorded equal rights.[2]

A big problem for the creators of any cryptolect lay in the natural human ability to recognise language, even in deliberately abstruse forms. While a sentence in Polari might bear little resemblance to textbook English, any native speaker could guess from context and intuition that "bona to vada your dolly old eek again" meant "nice to see you again". This almost uncanny ability to make sense out of nonsense has not gone unnoticed by linguists. As early as the 1870s, Lewis Carroll made this very point via the poem "Jabberwocky", in which about a third of the vocabulary (including almost all of the substantive words) consisted of made-up terms, but which was nevertheless entirely comprehensible as the story of a boy who kills a monster.[3]

As cryptolects moved into the digital age, however, this flaw was transformed into an advantage. Rather than creating new vocabularies (as in Polari) or using systematic cryptographic rules (as in Verlan), internet users aiming to avoid surveillance increasingly favoured strategies based on the speedy adoption and abandonment of new slang terms, relying entirely upon readers' ability to guess the intended meanings.

2. Hidden in Plain Sight: Secret Communications in the Internet Age

The earliest internet-based cryptolects were relatively systematic, mirroring their analogue predecessors. The online gaming language l33t (also known as leet, 1334 etc.) followed relatively stable rules, which–once deciphered–rendered it comprehensible to outsiders as well as insiders.[4] Thus, 3 always stood in for the letter E, for example, and the digit 0 for O.

The Chinese equivalent of l33t, "Martian Language" (火星文, or *huoxingwen*), was less rule-based, and thus more adaptable. Standard characters could be replaced with homophones (for example, using 迺 to stand in for 乃, where both are pronounced "nai"), visually similar characters (such as 魡 for 的), synonyms, or characters drawn from other languages (Latin, Cyrillic, Japanese, etc.). Unlike in l33t, one character could be represented in many ways. The word 人 (person), for example, could be written as 亻, 朲, 亼, ren, 仌 or 秂, while remaining intelligible to readers. The wider variety of replacement options produced a much looser system, and thus enabled users to retain secrecy even as the authorities began to recognise certain characters and combinations of characters as having cryptic meanings.

1 Paul Baker. 2003. *Polari - the lost language of gay men*. Routledge.
2 Zhao Liming, "The Women's Script of Jiangyong". In Jie Tao, Bijun Zheng, Shirley L. Mow, eds, *Holding up half the sky: Chinese women past, present, and future*, Feminist Press, 2004, pp. 39–52.
3 Martin Gardner. 1999. *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*. New York, W. W. Norton and Company.
4 Erin McKean. 2002. "L33t-sp34k," *Verbatim, The Language Quarterly* 27, no. 3, pp. 13-14.

Martian Language remains a reliable technique for avoiding censors, but is slow to type and read, meaning that its mainstream popularity faded relatively quickly.[5] However, the idea that language could be adapted quickly to remain one step ahead of the censors remained a mainstay of online communication in China. The most famous example of this principle in action was the evolution of the terms used to refer to censorship itself. Following President Hu Jintao's "harmonious society" movement, netizens began referring ironically to censorship as "harmonisation" (和谐), describing blogs or posts that had been taken down by the authorities as having been harmonised. When the censors began to pick up on this usage, the word "harmonise" was replaced with "river crab" (河蟹), which is pronounced similarly. When the authorities began checking for this term, it was replaced with the euphemism "aquatic product" (水产).

Over time, as the authorities' censorship mechanisms improved, language had to evolve faster to out-pace them. While the transition from "harmonisation" to "aquatic products" happened over the course of several years, new terms can now spread across the Chinese internet in days or even hours, before disappearing just as quickly as the algorithms catch up. One common example of this would be the plethora of nicknames given by netizens to North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un. Because the Chinese government's friendly relations with North Korea were regularly subjected to online criticism, the authorities tended to censor related stories and terms. The result has been that nicknames for Kim Jong Un have proliferated, with netizens referring to him as "Fatty the Third", "Fatboy Kim", "鑫" (the character for Kim repeated three times) and diverse other variants upon these terms. Often, new names were only used for a day or two while a particular story was in the news. When Kim visited Beijing for the first time, his presence was concealed by the domestic media, but local netizens shared photos and footage of his train and motorcade online, referring to him as "Zhu Bajie" (an anthropomorphic pig from the classic novel *Journey to the West*), "Fatty on a Train" and "the visitor from the Northeast".

At the same time as language was evolving, other methods for evading censorship developed; notably, the use of image files, memes, and even emojis to share stories and opinions. Thus, when the authorities censored the #metoo hashtag (a Western hashtag adopted by netizens to bring attention to the prevelance of sexual harassment), it was replaced by emoji of a bowl of rice and a rabbit (pronounced "mi tu" in Mandarin).[6] While government search algorithms could do much of the heavy lifting when it came to scanning texts for banned terms, they have traditionally found the identification of subversive images much more difficult. In recent years, however, visual search software has become more sophisticated, enabling the authorities to identify and suppress particular images.[7] Once again, this has acted as a spur to the inventiveness of netizens, who have increasingly taken to creating their own memes or developing new takes on old concepts in order to evade the algorithms and retain a level of ambiguity sufficient to elude human censors.

5 James Billington. 2017. "Chinese social media users revive secret 'Martian' language to evade government censors", International Business Times, 31 July 2017. Retrieved 5 August 2018: https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/chinese-social-media-users-revive-secret-martian-language-evade-government-censors-1632807

6 Yuan Yang. 2018. "China's 'MeToo' movement evades censors with #RiceBunny", *Financial Times*, 9 August 2018. Retrieved 20 August 2018: https://www.ft.com/content/61903744-9540-11e8-b67b-b8205561c3fe

7 Natasha Bach. 2018. "Why China Is Censoring Winnie the Pooh—And the Letter 'N'", *Fortune*, 1 March 2018. Retrieved 5 August 2018: http://fortune.com/2018/03/01/xi-jinping-winnie-the-pooh-censored/

The key advantage of these techniques for their proponents is that they were not rule-based. In order to understand the new terms and tropes, one had to spend large amounts of time interacting with the online communities that used them; and do so continually. It was no longer possible to "learn" the relevant cryptolects because they evolve so rapidly. Today's trends and conventions would appear hopelessly out-dated after a year.

While China's strict internet censorship regime made its netizens leaders in the field of concealing subversive statements, the same trends were visible globally, though they tended to be driven by different forces. The US, for example, saw the development of similar internet cultures to those present in China, where the understanding of rapidly-evolving in-group slang and visual jokes is crucial to communication. In the US case, however, the primary driver was the desire to demonstrate and reinforce subculture membership status, rather than to evade state censors. Even if netizens' cryptolects followed similar evolutionary paths, however, government responses to the reduced ability of the state to control public discourse varied widely. Many governments viewed the issue as being a simple binary choice between censorship and tolerance, and "fake news" laws intended to censor unapproved narratives have proliferated in recent years. Malaysia, Germany, and others undertook legislative measures to restrict the freedom to publish online, with other countries either considered legislation (Ireland, France, the UK) or attempted and abandoned attempts to ban fake news following popular backlashes (India). Other governments took a more pro-active approach to the flourishing online communities that defy state control, whether by interacting with, emulating, or co-opting them. We will examine four examples of governments that have taken more creative approaches to online counter-narratives, beginning with Singapore and moving on to look at China, Russia and the US.

3. Ownself Satirise Ownself: Competing and Crowding-Out in Singapore

Singapore had for decades imposed relatively strict controls on domestic media. Local newspapers, radio, and television channels were managed by two companies only—Mediacorp (state owned) and Singapore Press Holdings (publicly-traded, but with close ties to government). Foreign media wishing to publish in Singapore were subjected to heavy regulation, being obliged to appoint a legally liable local representative and pay a 200,000 SGD security deposit as a guarantee of compliance with local libel and sedition laws. Foreign publications that infringed on these rules could have their circulation restricted, be sued for defamation (an option taken by politicians on a semi-regular basis), or banned outright, as happened when the *Far Eastern Economic Review* published an interview with opposition politician Chee Soon Juan in which he said that members of the government had "skeletons in their closets". Official restrictions were complemented and reinforced by a culture of self-censorship and speech-chilling mechanisms. The informal list of subjects that were not open for public debate—referred to locally as "OB markers"[8]—evolved over time and according to context, but was generally acknowledged by local media personalities and journalists. Some subjects—notably homosexuality—grew less sensitive over time, while others such as immigration grew more sensitive, but all were recognised as being issues that were necessary to treat extremely carefully.

Prior to the spread of the internet, this system was relatively easy to enforce, given the small size of the country and the state's wide-ranging powers. As new technology gave citizens access to myriad new information sources, the government faced multiple challenges to its regulatory

8 "OB" stands for "out of bounds", a cricketing reference first coined by former Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo in 1991.

systems. While creating a heavily-restricted "national intranet" in the manner of the Chinese government would have been a feasible option—indeed, it would have been far easier to implement in Singapore than it has proved in China—it would also have had knock-on economic and commercial costs for an open, trade-dependent country. Instead, the government attempted to regulate blogs and online news sites using an approach similar to that taken towards foreign print media. In 2013, the government began requiring sites that regularly reported on Singaporean news, and which had at least 50,000 unique visitors per month from Singapore, to apply for annual operating licenses. Sites were also required to provide a 50,000 SGD bond to ensure good behaviour. Similarly, the government demonstrated a willingness to pursue non-compliant bloggers whether in the civil or the criminal courts. In 2015, for example, an anti-immigration website, The Real Singapore, was taken down for being "objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public order and national harmony", and its owners were subsequently jailed for sedition.[9] Similarly, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong successfully sued blogger Roy Ngerng for defamation after he implied that the government had misappropriated money held by the country's obligatory savings scheme, the Central Provident Fund.[10] However, while the Singapore government was comparatively strict with bloggers, it was generally more lenient with regard to online comment by ordinary netizens. The internet facilitated the expression of popular discontent and gave those with complaints against the authorities a far greater sense of shared identity, as well as accelerating and expanding the spread of the slang and in-jokes that Singaporeans have always used as a means to express implicit criticism of the government. (The title of this segment references one such joke: when asked about checks and balances, former PM Goh Chok Tong replied with the phrase "ownself check ownself", meaning that the ruling party would deal with problems internally. The "ownself X ownself" formulation has since become a byword for unaccountability.)[11] However, despite the flourishing of a lively and outspoken online public space, the Singapore government remained remarkable for its disinclination to submit take-down requests to Google or Twitter.[12] Indeed, recent years saw the development of a form of unspoken agreement that the OB markers and even—in some cases—sedition laws, would not be stringently applied to ordinary citizens commenting online.

The result was that many popular content-producers tried to walk a fine line, exploiting the narrow gap between broadcaster and commenter that exists online. Satirical websites frequently relied upon social media to avoid falling into the category of "blogger" and thus having to submit to official content restrictions and—more crucially—the 50,000 SGD bond obligation. Thus, two of the more popular satirical content providers of recent years were not websites but Facebook accounts: *SMRT Ltd (Feedback)* (an account that began life mocking the national train service's perceived indifference to commuters) and *Cats of Singapore* (a Humans of New York parody that expressed politically-incorrect opinions by attributing them to local stray cats). A third site, *SGAG*

9 Rachel Au-yong. 2015. "Socio-political site The Real Singapore taken down after MDA suspends editors' licence", *Straits Times*, 3 May 2015. Retrieved 15 August 2018: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/socio-political-site-the-real-singapore-taken-down-after-mda-suspends-editors-licence

10 Walter Sim. 2016. "Blogger Roy Ngerng ordered to pay PM Lee Hsien Loong $150,000 for defamation", *Straits Times*, 19 January 2016. Retrieved 15 August 2018: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/blogger-roy-ngerng-ordered-to-pay-pm-lee-hsien-loong-150000-for-defamation

11 Chen Khin-Wee. 2016. *Citizen satire in Malaysia and Singapore: why and how socio-political humour communicates dissent on Facebook*. PhD. Dissertation, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

12 For more information on Singapore's removal and information requests to Google, see: https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/SG?hl=en&country_item_amount=group_by:reasons;period:;authority:SG&lu=country_item_amount For requests to Twitter, see: https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/sg.html

(a local imitation of the Hong Kong site *9GAG*), managed to side-step restrictions by posting only memes and videos, as well as by relying primarily upon its Facebook account rather than its webpage to drive traffic.

Figure 1 *- The Cats of Singapore Facebook page frequently used the idea of cats as a minority group to raise issues that were otherwise liable to fall foul of Singapore's strict racial harmony and sedition laws (kao peh kao bu is local slang for complaining).*

Figure 2 - The SMRT Ltd (Feedback) social media accounts began by trolling netizens looking for the national rail company's complaints department, before branching out into more general humour and political commentary.

While this was often a successful strategy for avoiding content restrictions and financial penalties, it was not risk-free. SMRT Ltd (Feedback) was investigated by the Attorney-General for posting politically-sensitive screenshots from a Facebook page belonging to Li Shengwu (a nephew of PM Lee),[13] and faced pressure to reveal the true identities of the page managers following accusations of harassment from another blogger.[14] It eventually removed its riskier posts from Facebook and abandoned its "edgy" image to become a full-fledged social media influence business.[15]

Though the parliamentary Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods subsequently recommended measures aimed at holding both producers and social media platforms responsible for the viral diffusion of user-produced "fake news", existing legislation was also used effectively to target those users with a high reach.[16] Amos Yee, an online filmmaker and vlogger, attracted a significant audience by posting controversial YouTube videos, before eventually being prosecuted for the "deliberate intention of wounding religious or racial feelings", "threatening, abusive or insulting communication", and obscenity as a result of a video in which he criticised Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and attacked Christianity.[17] In this case, Yee's existing notoriety and social media reach exempted him from the status of mere commenter, and rendered him susceptible to be prosecuted, as several viewers filed police reports about the video.[18] Indeed, over time public complaints seemed to become an unofficial filtering mechanism, used by the authorities to identify and target content liable to provoke social discord. Other content-producers have since mentioned receiving police visits and even suffering travel restrictions as a result of public complaints that nevertheless did not result in prosecutions. Under this system, public opinion effectively exerted a chilling effect upon itself.[19] The severity of the potential consequences could have a significant effect on publishers, even when no legal sanction was exercised. All Singapore Stuff was one of the fastest-growing alternative news sites until 2016, when it published a story about a ceiling collapse in a public housing complex that turned out to be untrue. No action was brought, but the site drastically reduced its output and has subsequently fallen dramatically in internet traffic ratings.[20]

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13 Tressa Lars. 2017. "Is Singapore's top troll SMRT Feedback in trouble over contempt of court?", *Observer*, 12 July 2017. Retrieved 15 August 2018: https://observer.news/featured/is-singapores-top-troll-smrt-feedback-in-trouble-over-contempt-of-court/

14 Valerie Koh. 2015. "Blogger Xiaxue obtains Protection Order against SMRT Ltd (Feedback)", *Today*, 5 February 2015. Retrieved 15 August 2018: https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/blogger-xiaxue-takes-out-protection-order-against-smrt-ltd-feedback

15 For the subsequent development of the SMRT Feedback business, see: https://www.linkedin.com/in/azlyjnor

16 Royston Sim, "Select Committee releases 22 proposals to combat fake news", Straits Times, 21 September 2018. Retrieved 28 October 2018: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/select-committee-releases-22-proposals-to-combat-fake-news

17 Kirsten Han. 2015. "Singapore police arrest 17-year-old over critical Lee Kuan Yew video", *Guardian*, 30 March 2015. Retrieved 15 August 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/30/singapore-police-arrest-17-year-old-amos-yee-critical-lee-kuan-yew-video

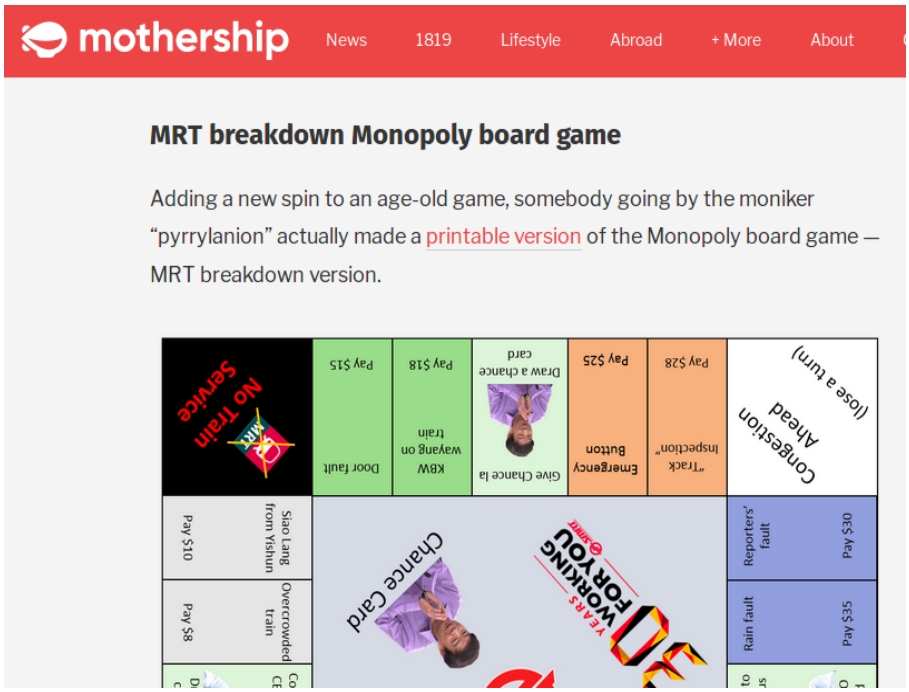
18 Chris Luo. 2015. "Singapore police arrest teenage activist behind anti-Lee Kuan Yew video", South China Morning Post, 30 March 2015. Retrieved 20 August 2018: https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/article/1750983/singapore-police-arrest-amos-yee-teen-behind-anti-lee-kuan

19 Wendy Cheng, speech at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, 17 October 2018. In the case described a single complaint was sufficient to trigger a temporary travel ban.

20 Interview, 5 October 2018.

However, the Singapore government has not limited its actions to occasional attempts to censor or inhibit internet comment. It also made forays into the world of internet satire itself. Nationally owned television channels had been producing satirical content for many years, with writers and producers allowed to mock local politics and society within the limits of official restrictions concerning the subjects that they could not otherwise cover. However, when comedians on the Channel 5 panel show *Ok Chope!* ran a segment involving some relatively anodyne jokes at the expense of Malaysian PM Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, those involved were subsequently obliged to apologise.[21] Members of the production team later mentioned other issues that had been declared off-limits, including homosexuality and the impounding of nine Singaporean military vehicles by the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong.[22]

In recent years, however, both public debate and the media that people consume increasingly moved online. Despite the restrictions on political blogging, numerous new media sites sprang up, often mixing news stories, satire, clickbait, memes, and comment. While many of these sites were low-budget, private operations, the state has also moved into the field, using both open and more discreet approaches to establish its own place on the market for satire and light news coverage. Some of these attempts failed: *Singapolitics*, a spin-off of the *Straits Times* intended to focus on commentary and promote outside voices, lasted only a few years. In contrast, *Mothership.sg*, which was run by a non-profit started by former government members and civil servants (among others), was a runaway success, and rapidly became the most popular new media site in Singapore.[23] Pitching itself towards the youth market, *Mothership.sg* used the written and visual vocabulary of ordinary netizens. While it took a generally pro-government stance, it nevertheless regularly joked about contemporary issues and reposted critical memes.



21 Danial Albakari. 2017. "Channel 5's Najip Ali apologises for poking fun at PM Najib in comedy", *Asia One*, 5 April 2017. Retrieved 15 August 2018: http://www.asiaone.com/channel-5s-najip-ali-apologises-poking-fun-pm-najib-comedy

22 Comments made during a talk at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, April 2017.

23 Robin Chan. 2014. "MDA asks website mothership.sg to register under Broadcasting Act", *Straits Times*, 3 April 2014. Retrieved 19 August 2018: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mda-asks-website-mothershipsg-to-register-under-broadcasting-act

Figure 3 *- Mothership.sg reposting a meme satirising engineering problems in the national train system (screen capture from the Mothership.sg website).*

In dealing with online subversion, the Singapore government relied to a degree on its capacity to exert or merely to hint at potential sanctions in the event that OB markers were crossed by high-profile content producers. However, it also adopted more creative and proactive strategies. Notably, it appeared to have experimented in applying the economic concept of "crowding out", whereby publicly funded activities in specific economic sectors satisfied such a large proportion of the finite demand that private businesses (subjected to more severe financial constraints) were unable to compete. If the relatively soft satire published by state or state-linked sites could remain sufficiently entertaining to satisfy a large segment of the market demand, consumers would not look elsewhere for what may well turn out to be more subversive material.

Crowding out more aggressive content-providers via the establishment of softer government-linked sites proved a solid strategy in Singapore. However, Singapore was a small news market (less than 5 million people) and most people (even satirists) were largely satisfied with the government. In a larger and more fractious state this probably would not be the case.

4. Blind Man's Bluff: Yunnan Turns Criticism into Participative Democracy

While China's relatively heavy-handed approach to censoring online communication has been described above, this was not the only approach taken over the years. While the battle between netizens and censors was often presented abroad (and particularly in the West) as being a struggle between heroic pro-democracy dissidents on one side and a faceless authoritarian bureaucracy on the other, the reality was generally more mundane. Netizens regularly chatted quite happily with the censors ("big mamas", in internet slang) appointed to the chatrooms that they frequent, and both sides generally treated censorship and its evasion more like a long-running game than a desperate fight between libertarian and totalitarian ideals. This reflected the prevalent belief among ordinary Chinese citizens that a certain amount of censorship and "thought leadership" by the government was appropriate and commendable, though the precise thresholds were subject to lively disagreement. Moreover, there was a certain amount of evidence that while the state seldom responded directly to online agitation, it nevertheless paid very close attention to internet opinion, and occasionally modified its policies and communication strategies as a result.

In February 2009, a man named Li Qiaoming was charged with illegal logging in Yunnan province, and subsequently died of head injuries sustained while being held in remand. Officials working at the centre where Li had been detained told the press that the injuries occurred when Li ran into a wall while playing blind man's bluff (躲猫猫 or *duo mao mao* in Chinese) with other inmates. This explanation provoked widespread ridicule online, with the phrase rapidly becoming a euphemism for police brutality and a symbol of all that was wrong with the justice system. The incident sparked debate across the country about the state of the prison system, and netizens began investigating this and other similar incidents, hoping to bring to light other injustices.

The conventional government response to such incidents had generally been to censor discussion online, while promising an inquiry and asking citizens to trust the authorities to solve the issue. Yunnan, however, was among the Southern provinces that tended to serve as China's political entrepreneurs, and its officials had more freedom to experiment with unconventional approaches. In this case, a young Deputy Director of the provincial Propaganda Department, Wu Hao, took control of the crisis communications, and pushed forward with a novel strategy. Rather than trying

to silence online discussion and wait for the storm to blow over, he invited critical netizens to participate in the official investigation of the incident. Wu was entirely frank about this being a strategic choice, telling the press that "the issue of public opinion online should be resolved using online methods"[24] and that "society needs venting mechanisms".[25] A local blogger, Fengzhimoduan (real name Zhao Li), was chosen to lead an investigation committee made up of four police officers/prosecutors, three journalists, and eight members of the public.

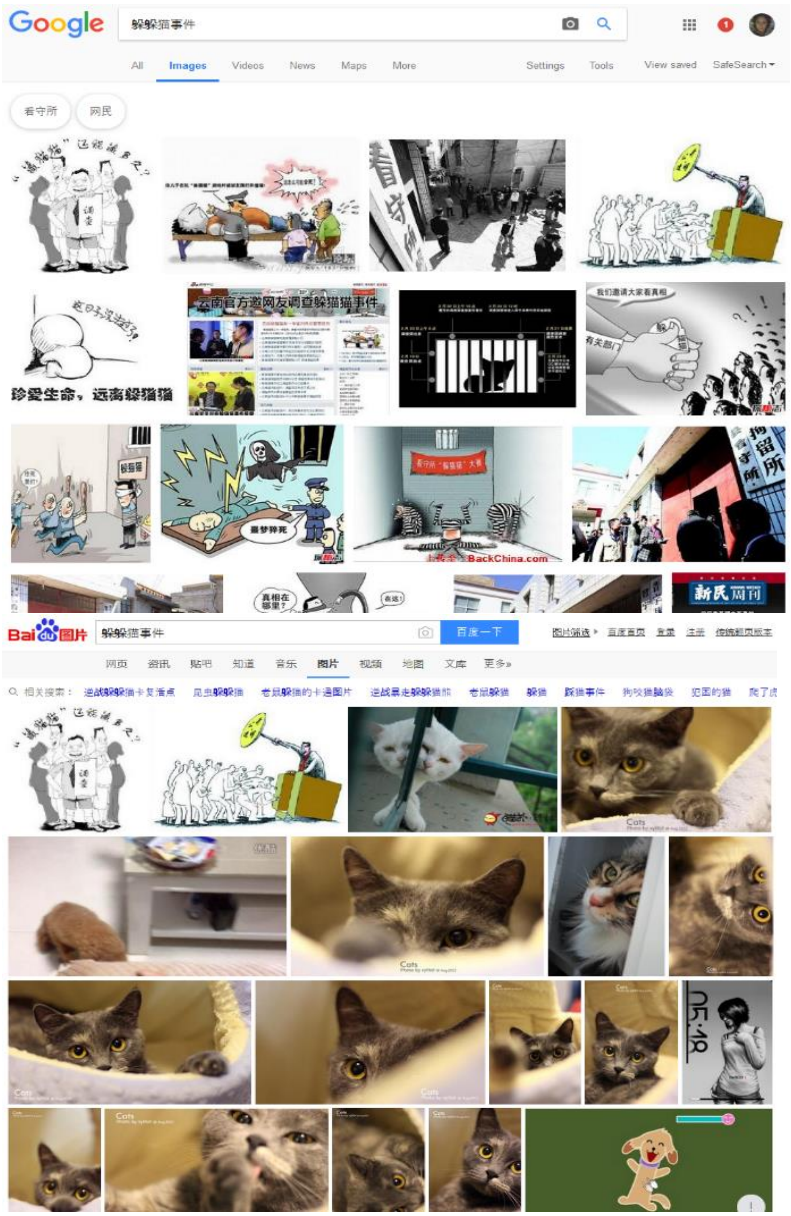


Figure 4 *- A Google search (above) for 躲躲猫事件 ("duo mao mao incident") brings up a wide selection of critical cartoons and memes. Only two of them feature among the Baidu search results for the same term (below).*

24 David Bandurski. 2018. "How Control 2.0 found its poster boy in Yunnan", China Media Project, 24 February 2009. Retrieved 5 August 2018: http://chinamediaproject.org/2009/02/24/how-control-20-found-its-fresh-new-poster-boy/

25 *Huashang Bao*, "Jianshao shehui fenmen xu geng kaifeng de biaoda huanjing" [A more open environment for public expression is necessary to reduce social indignation], 25 April 2009. Retrieved 5 August 2018: http://news.163.com/10/0425/02/6536P2KF00014AED.html

In the end, the committee did not reach a conclusion, given the lack of evidence, but details of its investigations were posted online. Public Security Bureau officials carried out an investigation of their own, concluding that Li Qiaoming had been beaten to death by fellow inmates. While the exercise elicited a certain amount of cynicism – participants were accused of being government stooges, and commentators complained that the measures taken did not solve the underlying issues – it nevertheless fulfilled its stated goal of providing a moment of catharsis for members of the public, who saw the incident as being emblematic of citizen powerlessness in the face of government power.

However, despite the apparent success of the communications operation, the techniques pioneered by Wu Hao and the Yunnan Propaganda Bureau were, by and large, not picked up by other provinces nor at the national level. While scandals involving misbehaviour on the part of public officials were a regular occurrence, since the Li Qiaoming incident few authorities have adopted the Yunnan approach in dealing with them, generally preferring a combination of censorship, patience, and internal inquiries. This could be attributed to a mixture of contingent and structural factors. Firstly, in 2012 President Hu Jintao, who tended to favour a more relaxed and people-centred vision of Party-society relations, was replaced by Xi Jinping, who preferred a more conventionally paternalistic approach. Secondly, the structure of China's political institutions promoted a zero-sum vision of power conflicts between local and national authorities. Giving local governments the latitude to carry out experimental policies such as those adopted in the Li Qiaoming case necessarily implied surrendering a certain measure of central control, something that national leaders were understandably reluctant to do, given the tendency of local leaders to use it to form cliques and independent power bases. While strong centralised control frequently produced inefficiencies and led to suboptimal results in individual cases, it was nevertheless the safest approach to government in the long run.

While Yunnan's response to the Li Qiaoming Affair was effective, it depended upon the relatively high level of autonomy given to the officials involved. Extending this freedom nationwide would constitute a risk to central government power, so the central authorities preferred to rely predominantly upon censorship to deal with critical online communications, using social media analysis and secret polling rather than public dialogue to take the temperature of public opinion.

5. The Great Meme War: Trading Insults in the US Democratic Marketplace

For most of the latter part of the 20th century, satire was largely the property of the politically progressive in the United States. Satire is, by its nature, a weapon of the anti-establishment, and the establishment was seen as being represented by centre-right conservatives, with the underdogs being found largely on the left. As Allison Dagnes put it in her study of U.S. political humour, "conservatism supports institutions and satire aims to knock these institutions down a peg".[26]

However, as the conservative pre-war generation aged, members of the more liberal baby-boomer contingent took their place. Over time, people who had spent their youth resisting the establishment became the new establishment, and their beliefs replaced older conservative ideals as the mainstream values of society. This created a gap in the market for anti-establishment media. This time, however, the niche was not filled by outsider journalism and stand-up comics, as had

26 Alison Dagnes. 2012. *A conservative walks into a bar: The politics of political humor*. Springer.

been the case in previous decades, but by online commenters, whether on social media or on fora such as Reddit and 4chan. Most members of these online communities had few political sentiments beyond a vague sense of disenfranchisement, and when they adopted political causes it was generally with a mixture of self-aware irony and a desire to tease the powerful and the self-important, rather than with the goal of advancing any particular ideology. Thus, 4chan's first large-scale real-world event was a protest against the Church of Scientology, less because of the organisation's criminal activities but because it lent itself to mockery by a wide spectrum of individuals who might not necessarily agree on other issues. The protest itself was as much a social gathering as a political one, based around the decision to own and affirm identities–NEET, gamer, *hikikomori*—that had conventionally been denigrated. Many of the costumes and signs displayed by the protesters had little to do with Scientology itself, but rather referenced in-group trends and memes, implying a goal of reinforcing a shared "outsider" identity rather than achieving concrete results.[27]

Figure 5 *– A popular meme showing 4chan members protesting the Church of Scientology; many of the protest signs reference other memes and have little or no bearing on the nominal subject of the protest.*

Over time, these groups realised that expressing traditionally right-wing views was an excellent way to provoke a reaction among members of the centre-left establishment, ideally annoying them into making embarrassingly out-of-touch declarations in the media, which could in turn be mocked online, thus reinforcing their group identity and sense of purpose.[28] Their mass endorsement of Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign began, for many, as a performative joke at the expense of a system that appeared to be biased against them. While these groups had endorsed anti-establishment candidates before (Ron Paul in 2008, for example),

27 Dale Beran. 2017. "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump", Medium, 15 February 2017. Retrieved 6 August 2018: https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb

28 This attempt by *Vox* to explain the process is a good example: Aja Romano. 2017. "How the alt-right uses internet trolling to confuse you into dismissing its ideology", *Vox*, 11 January 2017. Retrieved 6 August 2018: https://www.vox.com/2016/11/23/13659634/alt-right-trolling It was widely shared among mainstream commentators online, and has even been quoted in academic studies, while simultaneously serving as a subject for ridicule on the part of its subjects, who described it as an example of precisely the out-of-touch establishment viewpoints that they were aiming to satirise.

they had never been seen as a constituency whose support was to be welcomed. Trump, adopting a "big tent" strategy in his run for President, took a different approach, not just recognising them, but even going so far as to adopt their language—tweeting memes and staging photo opportunities in such a way as to create viral online images. By showing a willingness to make the effort to learn and adopt in-group vocabulary, he effectively assured his own assimilation into the group. For Trump, as for the original creators of the images, the ambiguity inherent in their design provided plausible deniability against accusations that they were associated with racist or other far right groups; while some racist netizens have adopted Pepe the Frog as a mascot, he is also used by a wide variety of other groups to satirise their own outsider status within society.

Figure 6 *- Donald Trump tweets a Pepe the Frog meme, borrowing from the visual vocabulary of anti-establishment online groups.*

This acknowledgement gradually transformed what had been a largely ironic declaration of rebellion into a genuine, cohesive political movement. While the irony remained a strong component of the enterprise, participants increasingly felt a sense of being able to influence national-level political debate, which was reinforced as mainstream media outlets began to focus on the threat from the "alt-right".

Figure 7 *- Donald Trump's habit of holding up newly signed bills for the press corps produced images that could easily be edited into memes by both supporters and opponents, as has happened here.*

At the same time, more mainstream television satirists, largely representing the centre-left establishment viewpoint, were increasingly being accused of alienating viewers by attacking ordinary conservative voters, rather than merely the politicians that represented them, and – possibly a worse crime – of being so preoccupied with politics that they were no longer funny.[29] Caitlin Flannagan argued that mainstream television satire had been so ineffective during the 2016 campaign that it had actually helped contribute to Donald Trump's victory: "Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, these shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives. When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering days' worth of viral clips, along with those of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers—they don't just see a handful of comics mocking them. They see HBO, Comedy Central, TBS, ABC, CBS, and NBC. In other words, they see exactly what Donald Trump has taught them: that the entire media landscape loathes them, their values, their family, and their religion."[30]

Figure 8 *- Trump supporters at a violent protest in Oregon satirised left-wing "Antifa" groups' use of paramilitary-style outfits to create dramatic imagery.*

In the US system, satire and subversion are weapons only available to underdogs; any attempt by the establishment to retaliate is "punching down", and thus not funny. They constitute one of the many slight advantages granted to challengers by this particular electoral system, which relies for its stability on opponents banding together to remove any group that remains in power for too long, or which appears to be growing dominant to the point of becoming overweening.

6. Meanwhile in Russia…: Chaos as a Strategic Choice

For many years Russia was a minor joke on the internet, seen as a chaotic, almost third world country, which could nevertheless be used as the butt of jokes without risking accusations of racism. Memes from the former Soviet bloc – a bear riding in a taxi, Orthodox priests blessing an MRI scanner, a man taking a bath in the scoop of a stalled excavator – were shared with the

29 Burt Helm. 2017. "Funny, How? Inside Stand-Up Comedy's Donald Trump Problem", *GQ*, 2 June 2017. Retrieved 6 August 2018: https://www.gq.com/story/stand-up-comedy-in-donald-trumps-america

30 Caitlin Flannagan. 2017. "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump", *The Atlantic*, May 2017. Retrieved 6 August 2018: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/how-late-night-comedy-alienated-conservatives-made-liberals-smug-and-fueled-the-rise-of-trump/521472/

caption “Meanwhile in Russia”, and no further explanation was required. Online, as Jamie Rann put it, Russia was “a land of excess, of extremes of despotism and of irrational freedom.”[31]

Figure 9 *- An iconic early "Meanwhile in Russia" meme*

While many governments could perceive this hijacking of their international image for the amusement of foreign netizens as a public relations disaster, the Russian authorities took a different approach. Led by the foreign-language news channels operating under the Russia Today brand (and rapidly joined by *In The Now*, a sister platform focusing exclusively on viral content), they actively embraced their nation’s eccentric international image. Rather than trying to promote a more salubrious picture of modern Russia, they became one of the prime distributors of “Meanwhile in Russia” content, sourcing and broadcasting meme-worthy content to the outside world. The strategy may initially have seemed risky, but over time the returns were nothing short of spectacular. Not only did the viral content attract vast numbers of viewers to what had previously been a minor international news channel, but the distinctive tone, postmodern sense of irony and refusal to take current affairs seriously produced a distinctive brand and a sense of engagement with viewers at a time when long-established news channels were increasingly suffering from audience cynicism and declining viewing figures. Russia’s growing online soft power even succeeded in contributing to a revival of national pride among Slavic diasporas abroad, with young netizens choosing to embrace aspects of their parents or grandparents’ cultures that would previously have marked them out as “white trash”. From the “Life of Boris” YouTube channel to Slavorum.org, post-Soviet culture achieved the impossible and became cool.

31 Jamie Rann. 2013. “Meanwhile, in Russia: Buzzfeed, Russia and the west”, *Calvert Journal*, 18 November 2013. Retrieved 12 August 2018: http://www.calvertjournal.com/opinion/show/1776/buzzfeed-russia-virals

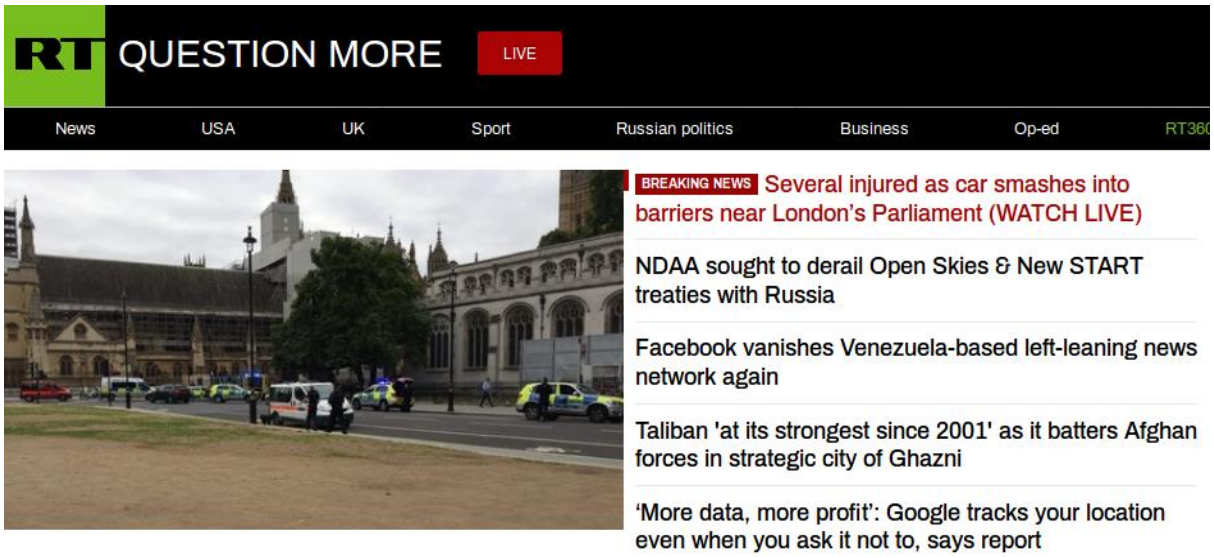


Figure 10 *- RT adopted a cyberpunk aesthetic, using black and green across its sites, as part of its communications strategy*

As in the U.S. example described above, this could be seen as an example of political actors successfully adopting "outsider" online language to achieve a sense of commonality with netizens and thus better advance their own goals. Russia Today's worldwide success was such that other countries began to look at copying their approach. Notably, China's CCTV began sending executives on annual training exercises in Moscow.[32] The effect was visible in a certain relaxation of the tone adopted by CCTV's international news services - via the inclusion of "frivolous" content from domestic variety programming, for example. However, China's highly centralised and risk-averse bureaucracy (as described above) precluded the full adoption of RT's highly responsive, entrepreneurial strategies.

However, RT and *In The Now* have not merely been vehicles for Russia's soft power, but also a way to export domestic strategies for reinforcing government dominance. Successive Putin and Medvedev governments were usually described abroad as having retained power via a mixture of authoritarian threats and corruption. However, this failed to explain the genuine, long-term success of the United Russia party, despite long-running border conflicts and frequently lacklustre economic performance. While the government employed highly effective positive communications strategies, "black hat" tactics – and particularly those based on disrupting opposition parties' capacity to organise themselves – were the basis of a substantial part of its success. Key among these was the co-optation of opposition members, whether openly or in a clandestine manner, and – more importantly – the widespread dissemination of rumours regarding the funding of various segments of the opposition by United Russia itself.[33] The possibility that any given opposition member may, in reality, be receiving funding from the ruling party was an effective tool for instilling mutual suspicion and preventing opposition groups from organising among themselves. Moreover, it created a situation in which any given "truth" could turn out to be either government propaganda or an opposition conspiracy theory, thus preventing

32 Information received via personal communications with Chinese journalists.

33 Kathrin Hille. 2016. "Russia: How to exercise political control", Financial Times, 7 September 2016. Retrieved 12 August 2018: https://www.ft.com/content/94c679fc-7418-11e6-b60a-de4532d5ea35

the development of coherent opposition narratives and magnifying the apparent power of United Russia itself.[34]

Figure 11 *- Orgonite, a Russian-speaking Israeli group, mixed references to post-Soviet and Middle Eastern culture in their music and videos*

Similarly, at the international level, RT – under the slogan "question more", frequently promoted official Russian narratives, but also promoted a wide variety of other narratives, often outlandish or mutually contradictory, giving particular attention to fringe political figures who would not otherwise succeed in getting airtime in their home countries. The result was to export domestic uncertainty over what was real and unreal to an international market. As Peter Pomerantsev put it: "nothing is true and everything is possible."[35]

Western democracies have repeatedly shown themselves to be highly susceptible to influence via this approach. Since the mid-2010s, no Western election was complete without a wave of accusations and counter-accusations centred on Russian interference via hacking attempts, RT, and social media accounts. In the 2016 US presidential elections, for example, both leading candidates were accused of collusion with Russia, while suspicions of Russian party funding have dogged recent European elections and helped to deepen divisions among EU members. From Moscow's point of view, the truth or otherwise of these suspicions was of far less importance than the damage that the subsequent rumours and infighting did to its adversaries' abilities to construct unified national narratives. If every party was suspected of being under Russian influence by its opponents, the "50%+1" rule of democratic legitimacy would begin to break down; there would be no need to accept that the opposition has won and therefore had the right to govern if they could plausibly be accused of working on behalf of a foreign power. This, in turn, would put foreign governments in a weaker position; if everything they did could be subjected to conspiracy theories about Russian manipulation, no coherent and unimpeachably patriotic internal position could be constructed from which to operate. Thus, strategies developed for disrupting internal opposition have effectively been transferred to target international threats.

If the Russian government appeared to have a stake in all available narratives, then its opponents (both domestic and foreign) would be unable to create an independent, unifying position of their own without suspicions of Russian government manipulation.

34 Peter Pomerantsev. 2015. "The Kremlin's information war." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4, pp. 40-50.

35 Peter Pomerantsev. 2017. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*. Faber & Faber.

Conclusion

The growth of the internet enabled the spread and development of secret and subversive communications on an unprecedented scale. Not only did it provide an uncontrollable Wild West frontier environment in which anonymity and encryption put underdogs on a semi-equal footing with state entities, but it also facilitated the rapid communication among specific interest groups that was the best breeding ground for cryptolects, memes, and other deliberately exclusionary forms of communication.

While many governments responded with attempts to censor, chill, or otherwise restrict online communications, the choice faced by governments dealing with this new environment was not a simple censorship vs. free expression binary. Many governments – including the four described above – have experimented with various methods for engaging with online public opinion. Whether throwing themselves into the online arena with undisguised gusto (Donald Trump; the Russian authorities), adopting a cautious approach to keep netizens onside (Singapore), or conducting occasional experiments within a largely traditional framework (China), the one constant that could be observed in every example was that political attitudes to internet opinion were influenced and constrained by existing structures. Thus, in the US case online subversion was available as a strategy only to political underdogs, while in China the freedom of policy entrepreneurs to experiment with new forms of mass communication was constrained by highly centralised administrative structures. Conversely, the Singaporean government's policies were easy to execute due to the small size of the country, while United Russia enjoyed a high level of leeway thanks to its overwhelming domestic dominance.

Discussion Questions

1. How has your government responded to the development of online opinion and subversion?

2. Consider the cases outlined above: what potential ethical issues arise in each?

3. What are the possible political downsides of each approach? How does this compare with the situation faced by your own government?

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