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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Information as a Source of Pressure: Local Government and Information Management in China

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian governments commonly control information flow to prevent the exposure of regime-damaging issues and to forestall collective actions against the regime. Authoritarian governments are claimed to enjoy advantages in information control when they possess resources and new technologies. However, these advantages do not necessarily alleviate the pressure of information management faced by authoritarian governments. Using the case of China, this study shows that information management involves not only the central government but also local governments. Local authorities encounter challenges in information management because of the financial pressure of maintaining the information-collection. In addition, they also face difficulties and costs when they act upon the information they have collected.

KEYWORDS: Local Government, Information Management, Pressure, China

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1. Introduction

In December, 2017, John Studworth, a BBC reporter tested the monitoring system in a Chinese city by having his face picture inputted in the system. It took the Chinese authority seven minutes to locate and apprehend him by using the network of CCTV camera and facial recognition technology (Liu and Wang 2017). China has the largest monitoring system in the world, with some 170 million CCTV cameras installed across the country in 2017. The number was expected to increase by 400 million by 2020 (Chen 2018). In addition to the sheer numbers of lookout points, China is harvesting information with a new-found focus on intelligence. The government has worked with facial recognition and AI companies that provide technologies to extract meaningful information such as faces, ages, registration plates and more from collected data.

Thus, although new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are claimed to have empowered the citizens (Diamond 2010), they seem to have empowered the government more significantly because of the government's adaptive capacity and resources (Morozov 2011; Gunisky 2015). The Chinese government has "surmounted, one by one, the technological difficulties of monitoring text messages, emails, blogs and chat sites" (Dou 2017). It has instituted perhaps the most sophisticated system in the world to monitor the people in China. With the assistance of new technologies, the Chinese government is able to both censor information and locate regime critics for discipline (Mackinnon 2011; King et al, 2013; Roberts 2018).

However, the government's resources and new technologies do not always alleviate the pressure it faces in information management. In China, information management involves both the central and local governments. For the sake of monitoring local agents and protecting the credibility of the state media (Lorentzen 2014), the central government has to grant a certain degree of autonomy to the media, allowing it to report certain negative news. Many Chinese people make complaints not about political issues but about issues concerning their daily lives or "low

politics” (Bialer 1980). As such complaints do not constitute direct political challenges to the Party-state, they may be reported by the media, including social media. More importantly, when high-publicity issues remain ignored by the government, the people will blame the government or the political system for their lack of accountability. As local governments are responsible for addressing such “low-politics” issues, they need to effectively manage the information in order to protect their image and performance.

This study suggests that while new technologies have enhanced the government’s ability to exercise control over the society, both the central and local governments in China face challenges in information management. The central government needs to balance between information control and information flow. Unlike the central government, local authorities do not have direct control over nationally influential media. They thus face the pressure of managing information because censorship is not always possible. In addition to the financial burden, local governments need to act upon the information it has collected. Mismanagement of information can have political consequences for local officials. Therefore, information can become a sources of pressure for local governments and help enhance their accountability.

2. Political System and Information Management

Autocrats commonly collect information about both power elite and the masses in order to ensure their political survival. In the former Soviet Union, the secret police were established after the Communist Party came to power. The secret police collected information on both officials and regime critics for the leader. They helped Stalin purge a large number of officials who were seen as his threats or rivals especially between 1936 and 1938. The secret police gathered intelligence, purged officials or suspected regime opponents, and instilled fear among the population. The former Soviet Union became “the world’s largest-ever police state—with a frightening track record of extreme violence” (Kotkin 2008, 173).

Rule through terror deters regime opponents. Authoritarian regimes that rely on repression create superficial legitimacy or pluralistic ignorance—citizens pretend to accept the political system, thereby creating a popular belief that many others accept or support the rule (Kuran 1991; Havel 1997). The pluralistic ignorance makes it difficult for both the government and regime opponents to assess the (un)popularity of the regime (Kuran 1991). However, information control also creates a problem for the ruler because a repressed population will not voice their true views about the regime. “The more threatened they are by the ruler, the more the subjects will be afraid to speak ill of or to do anything which might conceivably displease him or her” (Wintrobe 1998, 92). As a result, the ruler lacks reliable information on his (un)popularity.

To collect information and develop the economy, authoritarian governments may conditionally tolerate information flow. This tolerance, however, create challenges for both the central and local authorities in the political system. In his study of the former Soviet Union, Seweryn Bialer (1980, 16) distinguishes “high politics” from “low politics.” High politics involves the principal political issues of society, the abstract ideas and language of politics, and the decisions and actions of the political leadership. By contrast, low politics pertains to decisions directly affecting citizens’ daily lives, community affairs and workplace conditions.

In information management, the central government is more concerned with high-politics issues, whereas local authorities focus on lower-politics ones. According to Bialer (1980, p. 166), a lack of interest and curiosity allowed the Soviet people to remain untouched by high politics, and they mostly participated in low politics. This is not unique to the Soviet Union. In China, partly because of censorship, the citizens are more likely to voice low-politics grievances online (Zheng 2008; Yang 2009). More importantly, such messages can be tolerated by the central government, which creates an issue of information management for local governments.

The Chinese central government has created the Reporting Center for Internet users to provide tips on “unhealthy” information online. Table 1 presents the different types of information received by the center from May 2015 to June 2017. The Center stopped releasing information in light of these categories after June 2017.¹ Among the 61.9 million tips received by the reporting system, those pertaining to pornography account for 57.5 percent. Those related to political issues constitute a significant portion or 18.7 percent. Thus, messages concerning governance or low-politics issues were not the major target of censorship.

Because of government tolerance and the limited cost, it is common for Chinese people who have encountered problems to voice their grievances online. Local governments also have opened online petition systems or online mailboxes to which citizens can submit their demands (Su and Meng 2016). For example, in 2013, the national complaints system began to accept online petitions, a practice which was then adopted nationwide in 2015. From 2013 to 2015, online petitions accounted for 43.6 per cent of all petitions filed in China (Pan 2016). Chinese citizens have also posted messages on government websites, online mailboxes, various online forums, and comment sections of influential news portals. For example, people.com.cn has launched an online forum called “Message Board for Local Leaders” that allow the people to submit questions or complaints to their local leaders. Local governments are also requested to respond to these questions or complaints (People.com 2017).

¹ It only releases the total number of “unhealthy” tips now. See http://www.12377.cn/txt/2019-12/04/content_40984607.htm.

Table 1. Distribution of Valid Tips (May 2015 to June 2017)

	Tips (million)	Frequency (%)
Pornography	35.6	57.5
Politics	11.6	18.7
Fraud	4.0	6.5
Violation of Internet users' interests	2.8	4.5
Miscellaneous	7.9	12.8
Total	61.9	100

Source: Compiled from the Reporting Center website, http://www.12377.cn/node_543837.htm.

Chinese local governments have two primary goals in information management. First, local officials are assigned the responsibility of maintaining local stability, and they must prevent local residents from mobilizing collective actions that threaten local stability (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). Second, they need to prevent negative reports on their localities from becoming high profile or to contain the influence of exposed issues. Failing to manage negative news has political consequences for local officials (Zhou and Cai forthcoming). Information management constitutes a pressure on the local government because it requires resources to collect information. Local governments also need to adopt appropriate strategies to act upon the information they have collected.

This study aims to explore local governments' management of information in China. In addition to secondary sources, this study is based on the author's fieldwork in two cities in eastern part of China from 2016 to 2017. Seven government officials or government employees involved in information collection or management were interviewed during the fieldwork in the two cities. This study also details another two cases, City C and D in Jiangxi province, based on a secondary source.²

² Information on these two cities was collected from the email package released on a Chinese blog available at Xiaolan.me. Another set of data from the same email package was used by King, Pan and Roberts (2017) in their analysis of the "50-cent army" in China.

3. Local Government and Information Collection

Decentralization in China shifts the responsibility of local governance to local governments. Local officials' failures to deal with local issues can have political consequences. For example, local officials who have failed to handle local governance issues, such as social protests or production safety, may be disciplined (Cai 2014). Obtaining information on local situation in a timely manner is the precondition for the local government to handle local issues properly and effectively. Chinese local governments have employed both traditional and new methods to collect information.

3.1 Grid-Style Management and Information Collection

Chinese local governments have commonly adopted the so-called grid-style or net management (*wangge hua guanli*) in local communities. Specifically, the government divides the locality under its jurisdiction into a number of small zones, with each zone monitored by a designated person (*wangge yuan*). In one that I visited (i.e., City A), for example, the number of designated people in a township was three times that of the employees of the township government. Most of these designated people in the countryside were village cadres who were paid by the city government for their information-collection activities. Designated people regularly collected and reported information about their zones to the next higher level of authority. Reported issues concerned various aspects of local people's daily lives, including villagers' grievances against local authorities or environmental pollution.³

This practice of grid-style management has also been adopted in urban communities. Local governments have allocated financial resources to establish the "grid-style management center" that oversees its branches in urban neighborhoods. In a district of an eastern city visited (i.e., City B), the district grid-style management center was responsible for coordinating the 13 sub-grid-style management centers in the 13 street offices. The 13 sub-centers oversaw 312 work stations located in the

³ Author's interviews in City A, 2016.

residential communities in the district, or 24 stations in each street office on average.

The district center, the 13 sub-centers, and the 312 work stations constituted the network of information collection in this district. The work stations and the sub-centers regularly reported collected information to the district center. The district center and the city center also conducted inspections among the neighborhoods to identify issues and problems. The district center kept the data reported by its subordinates and provided monthly summaries based on the reported information.

Table 2 presents the 23,460 tips on community issues in the district in January 2016 that were divided into two categories: proactively collected ones and passively collected ones. Proactively collected tips were gathered by its grid-management system, whereas passively collected ones were reported by residents. As the table shows, more than 94.4 percent of the tips were proactively collected, whereas a small portion was passively collected. These tips mostly concerned the environment problems and facilities in neighborhoods. An analysis of 11,600 tips shows that 56 percent concerned unauthorized parking or vendors' activities and unattended garbage, and another 20 percent focused on unauthorized construction of outdoor facilities or destruction of facilities. In other words, these tips were all about "low-politics" issues.

Grid management has been widely adopted throughout China. In Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province, the city authority began to introduce the system in 2016 with a plan to hire 12,000 grid administrators, each of whom would be responsible for about 200 families. The number of administrators appeared to be based on the population of registered residents, not the migrants who swelled into big cities. The mayor explained that if an administrator was responsible for overseeing 200 families, s/he would be able to know the residents in his/her zone and obtain basic information about each family (Hornby 2016).

In the places where social stability is perceived to be a severe issue, social control is even more tight. In addition to the adoption of grid-style management,

other measures are also employed. In neighborhoods in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang where riots have occurred, a 100-point scale is used to evaluate residents. Those of Uighur ethnicity are automatically docked 10 points. Being aged between 15 and 55, praying daily, or having a religious education, all resulted in 10 point deductions. Every community committee in the city needed to conduct such assessments. The control culminated in the creation of so-called reeducation camps in recent years (The Associated Press 2019). Not surprisingly, expenditure on public security in Xinjiang in 2017 increased by 50 percent, compared with that of 2016.⁴ Since 2016, local authorities there have also adopted the so-called collective monitoring system in which a group of families (e.g., 10 families) are required to spy on one another. Discipline would be applied if these families fail in their duties (Shih 2017). In Lhasa of Tibet where the grid management has also been adopted, the local government credited this system for the calm and order in the city (Hornby 2016).

Table 2. Tips Received by the Local Government in January 2016.

Source	Tips	Frequency (%)
Self-collected:	22,141	94.4
Reported by monitoring staff	11,958	
Reported by residential districts	10,161	
Collected through district inspections	16	
Collected through city inspections	6	
Reported by residents:	1,321	5.6
12345 (hotline)	1,274	
12319 (hotline)	34	
Public complaints	13	
Total	23,462	100.0

Source: Author's collection, 2016.

⁴ For the statistics, see the annual report by the Financial Bureau of Xinjiang (2016-2018). http://www.mof.gov.cn/zhuantihuigu/2018sysbghb/201802/t20180224_2817391.htm; also Feng (2018); France-Presse (2018); Zenz (2018).

3.2 *New Technologies and Information Collection*

With the rise of new social media, Chinese local governments have also adopted new technologies to collect information in multiple ways. One is to assign specialized persons to deal with information matters. In the district in City B, the government designated a person specialized in the management of information matters; this person was also responsible for collecting information about the locality. In addition, the government had recruited about 25 news-collection volunteers who gathered news about their locality from various sources. The volunteers were expected to send reports or news to designated social media accounts of the government, such as QQ or WeChat accounts.⁵

A more important channel of information collection is through Internet companies or news agencies. Chinese local governments commonly outsource information collection to the business or state-owned news agencies that have the technological resources and expertise. Depending on the needs of a local government, the fees charged by Internet companies or news agencies varied. In the district in City B visited, the district government outsourced information collection to a news agency and paid a large amount of money for the service. In return, the news agency provided five types of service, including the monitoring of public opinion, reports on various issues, information analysis, and consultation.

The monitoring of public opinion involved three responsibilities. First, the news agency closely followed over a thousand news media in and outside China, including those located in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao, to collect both positive and negative reports on the locality. The media monitored include mainstream Internet websites, newspapers, and televisions. The news agency should conduct an analysis of the amount of news broadcast, the proportion of coverage, the medium of coverage, the regions the news was disseminated to, and the impact of negative coverage. The news agency also formed a team that provided analyses and judgment about important events that attracted public attention. The news agency was also

⁵ Interviews in City B, 2016.

expected to submit a report to the designated local authorities through email between 4:30 and 5:00 pm every day.

Second, the news agency should review and analyze important events of the previous month and send the reports to designated departments before the 10th of each month. Third, when important and emergent incidents occurred, the news agency should inform the local authority through text messages at the first moment regardless of whether or not it was a holiday. It should also provide analysis of public opinion based on the needs of the district government. When negative reports were detected, the news agency should send the message to the local authority through both emails and phone messages in a timely manner.

The district government also signed an agreement with a telecommunication company to better maintain social stability. The company, which was responsible for the construction of the “smart city” for the government, was expected to help the district government in four areas: the construction of a peaceful and safe city, the construction of cyber governance, the construction of a credit system, and the construction of a civilized city. But what the district government expected most from the company was that the company needed to provide technical assistance to ensure public security. When sudden events occurred, the company would provide ways of transmitting mobile video to the government to better handle the events.⁶ It would also help government staff who were collecting information on the site with technical guidance and support. The company would regularly upgrade the existing monitoring equipment for the governments at different levels in the district. The monitoring network in this district would be incorporated into the monitoring system of the city.

⁶ The district government also had an administrative center where a monitoring system based on a network of video cameras was instituted.

3.3 Problems with Information Collection

Chinese local governments face two challenges in information collection. One is the cost involved in maintaining the information collection system. The other is related to the legitimacy of information collection because certain information concerns citizens' privacy. Chinese local governments have invested a large amount of resources in creating and maintaining the monitoring system, but they varied in terms of their financial capacity. In City A, each grid-management member was paid 400 to 500 yuan per month. But because the township and county governments lacked financial resources, these grid management staff were paid by the city government. As maintaining social stability is the top priority of local governments, this grid-style management system has been widely adopted in the country. But local financial resources affected the number of recruited grid-management staff as well as their pay.⁷

Resource availability also affects local governments' information collection in other ways. Resourceful governments are better able to secure new technologies and allocate resources and manpower for information management. In contrast, resource-deficient ones tended to limit their budget. In City B, another district government was more cost-conscious due to its budget constraint. It outsourced information collection to a private Internet company that charged much less than state news agencies did.⁸

Information collection and social control seem to have created a government-business nexus that has in turn resulted in vested interests that will pressure the government to continue to invest in and maintain the system. For example, state news agencies have made considerable profits by providing information services to state agencies, local governments, and other businesses. The subsidies received by people.com and xinhuanet.com from the government were only a small portion of

⁷ Talk with government officials, 2016.

⁸ The propaganda department in this district outsourced information collection to an Internet company who promised to "fulfill the responsibility." This Internet company charged the district government 1.2 million yuan per year, which was lower than that charged by the Xinhua news agency. Interviews, 2016.

their total revenue (Table 3). In 2013, people.com only received 500,000 yuan in subsidy, and xinhuanet.com received 9.8 million yuan (6 percent of its net revenue). Providing information services to customers has become an important source of revenue of these agencies. In 2014, Xinhuanet's income, resulted from information services, increased dramatically- by 81.5 percent-, compared with that of 2013. Intelligent analysis of big data contributes to a large portion of the revenue. Major customers of the big-data service are national state agencies, information management departments, and local state authorities.

The monitoring system thus creates beneficiaries who are reluctant to give up their interests. Some of these beneficiaries can overstate the problems with social control in order to justify their continual efforts of information collection. For example, businesses engaged in the surveillance industry can lobby local governments to keep updating their surveillance system in order to sell their products. The business can also find allies or representatives in the decision-making body to represent their interests.⁹ Moreover, because of departmental interests or a lack of coordination, information may not be shared across agencies. As a result, different sectors and agencies have to maintain their own networks of information collection, causing a waste of resources invested in information collection.¹⁰

⁹ Talk with a Chinese scholar specialized in surveillance industry in China, 2018.

¹⁰ Talk with government officials, China, 2016.

Table 3. Statistics on people.com and xinhuanet.com (100 million yuan)

	2012	2013	2014
People.com			
Business turnover	7.0	10.2	15.8
Advertisement turnover	3.94	5.41	5.72
Net revenue	2.1	2.7	3.3
Government subsidy	0.126	0.005	0.278
Xinhua.com			
Business turnover	3.3	4.6	6.3
Advertisement turnover	1.82	2.9	3.48
Net revenue	1.3	1.6	1.88
Government subsidy	0.133	0.098	0.122

Source: “Xinhua wang IPO huò pǐ” (The IPO of xinhua.net approved), <http://business.sohu.com/20160420/n445212585.shtml>, accessed April 20, 2016.

Information collection has created another problem in China—violation of citizens’ rights or privacy. For example, in 2017, Chinese authorities in Xinjiang begun collecting extensive biometric data from residents aged 12 to 65 as part of an increasingly advanced state surveillance apparatus. Government notices mandated police officers and cadres to collect and record pictures, fingerprints, blood type, DNA and iris scans in six counties and prefectures through specially-designed mobile apps and a health check-up program offered to all Xinjiang residents (Feng 2017). Nominally, it’s part of a fitness program to screen for diseases, target health care, and create electronic health records. China’s database already had 54 million profiles by 2017, and the police had a goal of almost doubling its current DNA trove to 100 million records by 2020 (Fan et al, 2017). Collecting such information *per se* is controversial because it violates individuals’ privacy.

4. Information Management as a Pressure

Information collection is the first step of information management. The local government also needs to process and act upon the information it has received. The Chinese central and local governments commonly use censorship and discourse manipulation to contain the effect of exposed problems (Han 2015 a; King et al 2017). The central government is better positioned than local governments in information management because it has direct authority over influential media, including social media. As influential social media are limited in number, the central government can guide public opinion by exercising direct control over these few media, in particular WeChat and Sina weibo. For example, the central authority receives copies of the messages posted by WeChat users from Tencent.¹¹

Unlike the central government, local governments do not have direct authority over nationally influential media. Thus, censorship is not always possible for local governments, though they can still seek help from central authorities or Internet companies.¹² While local governments are unable to exercise direct control over influential media, they are held accountable for exposed local problems. They thus need to both guide public opinion or to act upon exposed local problems in order to protect their images.

4.1 Guiding Public Opinion

The Chinese government has strongly urged the media to release positive reports instead of negative ones because negative issues tend to damage the image of the government. For example, the Public Opinion Office of people.com released a report presenting Internet users' attitude towards hot issues or news in 2015. Out of the seven issue areas, public security (with a positivity index of 0.23), social conflict (0.38), and anti-corruption (0.44) were the three areas that the public were most critical of. The public were less critical about issues concerning sports, entertain-

11 Talk with former employees of WeChat, China, 2016.

12 Interview with a government official in City A, 2016.

ment, and celebrities (0.76).¹³ Table 4 reports the “positivity” index of the 16 high-profile incidents that occurred in 2015. Issues that most likely caused the public’s disapproval of the government often involved substantial losses of lives and property.

The attitudes of Internet users toward the parties directly responsible for the tragic events are naturally negative. Accidents that caused great casualties were most widely criticized, whereas incidents involving national pride received positive comments. For example, the most negative incident in 2015 was the fire in Harbin that caused 19 deaths, including deaths five firemen. The second most negative event was the stampede that occurred in Shanghai on the night of December 31, 2014 in which 36 people died. Needless to say, both the central and local governments face great pressure when such incidents occur.

¹³ The other three are news about firms; news about sports, entertainment, and celebrities; and miscellaneous.

Table 4. Incidents that Attracted Most Public Attention in 2015

Events	Positivity Index
Accidents	
1. The Fire in Harbin	-0.06
2. The Shanghai Stampede	0.16
3. The Sinking of "Oriental Star"	0.21
4. A BMW killed two people and injured one in Nanjing	0.24
5. The Explosion in Tianjin	0.36
Governance	
6. The management of private cars engaging in business	0.16
7. A man was shot in a railway station in Heilongjiang Province	0.20
8. The collapse of the stock market in June	0.44
9. Corruption of Shi Yongxin, the abbot of a Shaolin Temple	0.60
10. Li Keqiang urged ministries to simplify and decentralize administration	0.93
11. The arrest of Ling Jihua	1.02
12. The reform plan for football	1.42
Events of national pride	
13. Awarding of the Nobel Prize to Tu Youyou	0.82
14. The memorial ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War	0.84
15. Successful bid for the Winter Olympics	1.53
16. Xi Jinping's visit to the United States	1.88

Source: The Public Office of people.com, "An analysis of 2015 Internet public opinion," see the website <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/GB/392071/401685>.

4.1.1 Mobilizing Online Commentators

Both the central and local governments have to censor information or guide public opinion when influential negative events occur. One major method used to guide the public opinion is mobilizing online commentators. There are three types of online commentators in China. One is the so-called “voluntary 50-centers.” Self-mobilized Internet users voluntarily lend their support to the regime. As Han (2015 a) finds, these voluntary commentators have employed a range of tactics to defend regime against critics online, including counter labeling, attacks, mocking, and trapping or fishing. These voluntary 50-centers include leftists, nationalists, and patriots, and some of them become voluntary 50-centers because they do not accept the unsubstantiated claims or criticisms of the rightists (Xinhuanet 2008).

A second group of commentators are recruited from outside state agencies and are therefore paid (i.e., 50-centers). These people can be recruited by the propaganda department or by state agencies. Local authorities began to recruit paid commentators in early 2000s (Han 2015 b). These commentators were expected to “proactively raise topics for discussion, guide the people to look at hot issues correctly, and express their demands in a reasonable and legal way” (Southern Metropolis Post 2010).

Some commentators are recruited to work for specific state agencies. In City B, the justice department and a district government made a plan to form a new social media center for legal education and launch a project on “Internet + legal education.” The goal of this center was to train a team that would be able to complete the responsibility of legal education. The center was to sign contracts with 20 to 30 people who were familiar with law and new social media, in addition to having writing skills and enthusiasm. The writers would be remunerated for their work. For example, the remuneration for an article with less than 2,000 words was 1,000 yuan, and it was 1,200 yuan for an article with more than 2,000 words. Writers may be further rewarded based on the number of views and “Likes” an article received.¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview in City B, 2016.

A third type of commentators is recruited from within state and public institutions. Compared with the previous two types of commentators, this third one is more manageable. These commentators are recruited from a variety of state or government agencies, such as the propaganda department, the office of civilization, party schools, and agencies involved in cultural work. Many local state agencies have designated persons specialized in the work of information management. These people are familiar with both the Party's propaganda rule and Internet tools, in addition to mastering good writing skills. The authority also encourages other qualified people, including non-state employees, to join this group.

Commentators generally receive training before they start work. In City C in Jianxi Province, the city authority organized training sessions for 185 people from about 85 city state agencies, schools, public firms, and counties in 2014. These people received training in making online comments, managing governance weibo, and dealing with public opinion. Each of the counties had 6 to 10 representatives whose work duties were related to propaganda, news and information, and Internet. In one county, for example, five of the eight people participating in the training sessions worked in agencies related to information management and propaganda.¹⁵

In City D still in Jiangxi province in 2013, the city authority required each stage agency to designate a leader responsible for online public opinion.¹⁶ In each of the agencies, there should be a designated person responsible for the management of online commentators while serving as a commentator himself. County governments should also form teams of commentators. A commentator might be self-nominated or recommended by his work unit. In principle, there should be a commentator in each public agency with fewer than 20 employers, at least two in an agency with more than 20 employees. In addition, each of the counties should recommend two commentators to the city authority as city online commentators, and

15 "Canjia peixun mingdan" (List of participants of the training session), see <https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzgg.html>, accessed May 12, 2016.

16 "Guanyu jin yibu jiaqiang wangluo pinglun yuan duiwu jiansh de tongzhi" (Notification on further strengthening the construction of team of online commentators), see <https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzgg.html>, accessed May 12, 2016.

each city government agency should nominate one to the city authority. A report of a county government stated that 15 people nominated by the county government became city, provincial, and national commentators.¹⁷

The responsibilities of online commentators include keeping a close eye on the Internet, carrying out online propaganda, making online comments, guiding public opinion online, and actively responding to important events, in particular negative news. They are also expected to make comments and replies and guide the public opinion. Specifically, each of the commentators should publish a regulated number of articles on selected important websites and forums run by the central, provincial, and city authorities, in addition to fulfilling ad hoc responsibilities assigned by the city propaganda department.

4.1.2 Assessing Online Commentators

King et al (2017) suggest that the Chinese regime's strategy is to avoid arguing with skeptics of the party and the government, and to not even discuss controversial issues. But this practice also has to do with how online commentators are assessed. Online commentators are assessed by the number of articles, posts, and replies they post online, and it is not their responsibility to argue with regime critics. Indeed, the primary responsibility of online commentators is to show the presence of regime-supporting messages. Many of these messages are window-dressing ones that may not receive serious attention from Internet users. At the local level, the government generally mobilizes their online commentators to protect local images.

For example, in City D in Jiangxi province, the city propaganda department oversaw online commentators and assigned responsibilities to them each month.¹⁸ The city propaganda department regularly held training sessions, discussion meetings, and conferences for commentators in order to strengthen their abil-

17 "Ruichang shi 2014 nian wangluo anquan he xinxi hua gongzuo zongjie ji 2015 nian gongzuo dasuan" (The 2014 work summary on Internet security and informatization and the 2015 work plan of Ruichang city), see <https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzgzg.html>, accessed May 12, 2016.

18 "Jiujiang shi gong'an jiguan wangluo pinglun yuan jixiao kaoping zanzing banfa" (Provisions on the assessment of online commentators of Jiujiang police department), see <https://xiaolan.me/50-cent-party-jxgzgzg.html>, accessed May 12, 2016.

ity and improve their skills. It also made rules to assess the performance of commentators. If a commentator failed to perform his or her responsibilities for two consecutive months or failed three times in one month without justifiable reasons, the propaganda department would notify his or her work unit.

In a 2013 report, the online propaganda office of the city propaganda department listed the assessment of each of the 17 county and district governments. As a whole, the governments had recruited 740 commentators who published 994 articles on influential websites, such as people.com and xinhuanet.com. In a 2014 work report issued by a county authority in this city, it was indicated that its 106 commentators who were coordinated through a WeChat forum published more than 2,000 articles about the county on mainstream websites.¹⁹

In City D, the police department specified the assessment of online commentators as early as in 2011. A commentator's responsibilities were divided into three types. One was the basic work which constituted 30 points. Each commentator needed to open one account in about 20 influential (national and provincial) websites and two accounts in designated city and county websites. The second was daily work, which was also accounted for 30 points. Each commentator should publish three articles and make at least 20 replies each month in order to raise one's status on online forums. A commentator would gain 10 points if he or she became the moderator of a forum of a nationally influential website, seven points for being a moderator of a forum of a provincial website, and five points for being a moderator of a forum of a city website.

The third item was the management and guidance of online public opinion, which accounted for 40 points. When called upon by the office of online public opinion of the bureau, commentators should guide public opinion online and keep a record of the replies and articles he or she had posted online. When responding to online messages involving police, commentators should listen to the instructions of upper-level authorities. For example, if the instruction is "making fewer replies (*shao*

19 "The 2014 work summary on Internet security and informization and the 2015 work plan of Ruichang city."

yan) or make cautious replies (*shen yan*),” commentators should post fewer messages to prevent the cascade of public opinion.

Commentators should act accordingly if asked to guide public opinion by posting messages on national, provincial, and city websites. A commentator would lose 10 points for failing to post sufficient messages on national websites, and 5 points for failing to post sufficient messages on provincial or city websites. In addressing cases involving police, a commentator would gain 10 points if he or she was able to post messages on national websites and offered important help to preventing the cascade of public opinion, and five points for posting such messages on provincial and city websites.

Each county police bureau in the city would make a brief summary of each commentator’s performance each month and a detailed summary each quarter. An overall assessment would be conducted at the end of each year. The city bureau would allocate a budget to reward the top 20 commentators at the end of each year. When managing crises of public opinion, if the commentator failed to follow the city bureau’s regulation and damaged the image of the police, his or her work-unit leaders would be held responsible. When guiding public opinion, if a commentator disclosed his or her identity, caused negative public opinion, and rudely treated Internet users, a notice of criticism would be circulated. If the consequence was particular severe, administrative discipline would be imposed.

Such measures reflect the pressure faced by local governments in information management. However, despite these efforts, local governments may still fail to manage information in a way as they wish. Time and again, issues revealing the problems concerning local governments or local officials are disclosed and attract public attention. Some of the exposed officials have been disciplined after their malfeasance became high profile (Zhou and Cai forthcoming). Thus, information flow constitute a constant pressure on local governments and their officials because of the possibility that media exposure may lead to discipline. Thus, local officials sometimes approach public relations companies in order to delete undesirable online messages (Dai 2019).

4.2 Pressure of Responsiveness

Chinese local governments also face the pressure of responsiveness in information management when they fail to censor the information or guide public opinion. New ICTs empower the citizens because they enable citizens “to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom” (Diamond 2010, 69). In China, a better flow of information increases difficulties for the authoritarian government to avoid blame. The Chinese central government enjoys significant space to avoid being blamed for problems that occur at the local level because it is not directly involved in local governance. It can thus pretend not to be aware of local problems (Cai 2008). However, a better flow of information makes it difficult for the central government to pretend.

The Chinese people understand that lower-level authorities and agents are held accountable to upper-level authorities, including the central government. An improved flow of information increases the government’s difficulties in blame avoidance in two ways. One is the enhanced publicity of reported problems. When some issues gain high publicity among the population, they become common knowledge of the public and the government. As a result, the central government can no longer pretend that it does not know about the problems. Second, repeatedly reported problems will eventually make people believe that the central government is aware of the problems. The central government’s concern over regime legitimacy may lead it to intervene or to pressure local agents to solve exposed issues.

Therefore, the political space for blame avoidance on the part of the central government is determined by whether the public believe that the central government is aware of the exposed problems caused by local agents. If the public knows that the central government is aware of their problems, the latter loses legitimacy if it fails to respond or to pressure local governments to respond. This explains why peasants are disappointed by upper-level governments, including the central government, when their petitions against local governments were ignored by the central authority (Li 2004; Yu 2005). However, if local governments believe that

the central or high-level local government pays attention to exposed local issues, they are under the pressure to respond (Chen et al 2016).

4.2.1 Local Responsiveness

Chinese local officials have been disciplined for their inappropriate handling of reported issues (Cai 2014). Although not all local officials have been disciplined, media exposure remains a threat to them. Local governments are particularly reluctant to see negative cases becoming the focal point of public attention because such cases also create pressure on their superiors. Local officials are thus strongly motivated to respond to high-profile cases in order to prevent them from becoming the constant focal point. Some of the high-profile complaints or issues were thus solved by local governments with or without the direct intervention of high-level authorities (Zheng 2008; Yang 2009; Tong and Lei 2013).

In the district in City B visited, some of the detected issues in 2016 were reportedly solved. Monitoring staff provided quick solutions to 8,633 issues (or 59.5 percent). In January 2016, they solved 59.8 percent of the 11,958 issues and reported the remaining to the upper-level authority. In this month, the district authority surveyed residents to see their attitudes towards the 577 cases that had been addressed. It found that 51 percent of the residents were satisfied with the solutions. It is difficult to verify the reliability of the survey, but it is likely that some of the reported issues were addressed.²⁰

Local governments pay close attention to exposed issues because some of them may attract public attention. In the district of City B visited, the news office of the propaganda department was responsible for collecting information. The propaganda department had a leadership group responsible for analyzing the collected information and making decisions on how to address exposed issues. Each day, after the staff responsible for information management compiled a report on reported local issues, the leadership group would discuss how to deal with the exposed issues. This group would come up with a report on important events and submit it to

²⁰ Author's fieldwork in City B, 2016.

the four authorities around 10 o'clock in the morning—the district Party committee, the government, the people's congress, and the political consultative conference.

If an issue needed to be clarified or if there were rumors to be rebutted, the local authority would make public clarifications. In dealing with negative reports, the authority first verified the reports. If the reports were proven to be false or partly false, local leaders might convene a meeting with experts from pertinent fields (e.g., food safety). The government's office of emergency matters would come up with a proposal that outlined a division of labor among pertinent agencies. A unified statement would be made when dealing with the media. The local authority might also mobilize commentators to guide public opinion online. The district government had 50 Internet commentators who were mostly employees in the propaganda department or the civilization office.²¹

The district authority addressed verified cases by distinguishing between the outlets. If negative reports were released by the central and provincial-level media, the news office would consult pertinent agencies, gain information, and communicate with journalists. Pertinent state agencies needed to report the redress measures within five days. If an issue was reported by other media, a response from pertinent state agencies needed to be made within seven days. The news office needed to report the feedback and redress measures that had been taken to the district Party committee and the government. A unified statement would be released through official media, like television. The redress would be released to newspapers, television, news websites, and weibo and WeChat. The news office might also contact journalists and provide them with rectification measures that had been employed.

The performance of the district agencies responsible for information management was assessed with a point system. If an agency was seen as ineffectively managing negative reports or if the issues were re-exposed, responsible leaders would lose points, whereas those who succeeded would gain points. The news of-

21 Interviews in City B, 2016.

office was also responsible for follow-up reports on exposed issues. It might approach the media proactively to invite them to report on the rectification. In addition, the news office regularly analyzed and compiled the cases addressed by state agencies. In this district, the propaganda department held sessions to train spokesmen for government departments each year. A case in which negatively reports were successfully handled would be used as an example in such training sessions.

In City D in Jiangxi Province, the city authority outsourced information collection to Xinhua News Agency, in addition to designating its own people to collect information online. The city propaganda department is responsible for overseeing the response to exposed issues by lower-level authorities, including county and township governments, street offices, public schools, and state-owned enterprises. In 2014, the city propaganda department required these parties to address 1,160 citizens' complaints the department had collected, including the reports provided by Xinhua News Agency. Of these complaints, 22 percent of them were addressed by pertinent authorities (Cai and Zhou 2019).

Chinese local governments face the pressure of response because the central government tolerates media exposure of "low-politics" issues and because local authorities are unable to directly control influential social media (Tong and Lei 2013; Chen et al 2016; Cai and Zhou 2019). As long as the central government is concerned with regime legitimacy, government responsiveness is seen as necessary to protecting the legitimacy. This need of responsiveness constitutes a constant pressure on local governments that are responsible local governance.

4.2.2 Limitations of Selective Irresponsiveness

As it can be politically or economic costly to respond to all exposed issues, government response is selective, often depending on the pressure generated by the exposed issues (Chen et al 2016). Many of the grievances or complaints gathered by the government remain unsolved. The primary concern of local governments that face exposed issues is whether their response is acceptable to higher-level authorities. They may ignore exposed issues if they believe that doing it carries little risk.

Their ignorance can be a correct choice because disciplining malfeasant agents is a complex political issue in the Chinese political system (Cai 2014).

The central or provincial government does not always pressure local authorities to address exposed issues. Instead, the central or provincial government sometimes turns a blind eye to local governments' ignorance of exposed issues or even tolerates the latter's use of repression. In addition, local governments may politicize and then repress disobedient citizens. Some people were disciplined not because they criticized the regime, but because they criticized the local government. But local governments may claim that such criticisms are directed at the political system instead of the local government (Cai 2010).

High-level local governments are even less likely to be disciplined for their malfeasance. For example, in November, 2017, the city authority of Beijing launched a citywide campaign to demolish illegal dwellings after an apartment fire killed 19 people earlier that month. The forced demolitions and evictions mostly took place on the city's rural-urban fringes, home to millions of migrants or "low-end population" from other parts of the country who worked in low-paid service jobs. Many migrants were forced out of their rented apartments in the winter, with their property destroyed. When the news reached the public, the campaign gave rise to strong public anger, and the government's move was seen as inhuman (Battaglia 2017). As a protest, some people printed the term "low-end population" on their T-shirts to show their support for migrant workers.²²

The central government tried to downplay the forced eviction in Beijing. The censors were ordered to shut down online discussions and criticisms about the evictions in Beijing, and the Chinese news outlets were banned from publishing investigative reports and commentaries on the incident. However, Hua Yong, a Beijing-based artist posted dozens of short videos recoding how the authorities had forced tens of thousands of people to leave the city and demolished vast swaths of neighborhoods. The police came to arrest him after he filmed residents protesting

22 When online shops in Taobao.com sold such t-shirts, they were soon ordered to stop the sale. "Taobao chuxian 'diduan rekou' mao T" (Taobao.com sells T-shirts printed with "low-end population," *Apple Daily*, November 30, 2017.

by blocking a roadway. With the help of the villagers, Hua managed to escape. When he was running away, he kept posting videos about his situation before he was eventually caught and detained (France-Press 2017). Although he was released later, none of the government officials in Beijing was held liable for this event.

Both the central and local governments make political calculations in deciding on whether and how to respond to public opinion. Selective response may damage the regime's legitimacy if government malfeasances or irresponsibility is frequently tolerated. The central government's concern over regime legitimacy is the primary constraint faced by local governments in information management. The degree of the central government's concern dictates the pressure faced by local governments in information management.

5. Conclusion

Authoritarian control over the society can be compounded by the government's lack of information on the masses' views about the regime. Without such information the government is unable to assess the size of regime opponents or the severity of popular grievances. Censorship can thus create what Wintrobe calls the dictator's dilemma: the ruler is afraid of enemies, but he cannot easily know who they are or how many they are. As a result, the rulers tend to use repression. However, "[t]he more his repressive apparatus stifles dissent and criticism, the less he knows how much support he really has among the population" (Wintrobe 2001, 35). This difficulty can be at least partially overcome when the government allows a monitored flow of information or media exposure (Chen and Xu 2017; Lorentzen 2014). However, when a society becomes a half-opened one, information flow creates challenges to the government.

This study finds that an authoritarian government's power and advantage in information control does not necessarily alleviate the pressure it faces in information management. The pressure comes primarily from those who support or accept the regime. In China, information management involves both the central and local governments. The central government has direct authority over nationally in-

fluent media and social media, and its attention tends to focus on “high-politics” issues. In contrast, local governments focus on the management of information concerning “low-politics” issues or local governance.

Both levels may face the pressure of information management. Authoritarian governments that enjoy people’s political trust are motivated to maintain the trust. In China, the central government still enjoys a higher level of trust among the people, at least compared with local governments (Li 2004). Legitimacy is thus a concern of the central government. Information becomes a source of pressure on the central government because some exposed issues concern people’s non-political complaints. When low-politics complaints are repeatedly ignored, the people lose their confidence in both the central and local governments.

As local governments are responsible for local governance and for most low-politics issues, they face several types of pressure in information management. One is the financial resources that are required to sustain the information collection system. Because of the rise of vested interest in the monitoring system, the government-business nexus is likely to persist. The business may pressure the government to keep investing in the system. Second, the local government needs to respond to or act upon the information it has collected. Unlike the central government, local governments do not have direct authority of nationally influential media. They thus face the pressure of responsiveness. Damages to the regime’s legitimacy emerge when government response falls below the public’s expectation. As local governments are part of the political system, their management of information is thus connected to the regime’s legitimacy. In this sense, the central government faces a similar pressure of responsiveness.

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