

Hearing Before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

“The PRC’s Universal Periodic Review and the Real State of Human Rights in China”

Thursday, February 1, 2024

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Thank you, distinguished Members of the Commission, for holding this important hearing and inviting me to participate.

Today I will discuss three aspects of Chinese state-backed online censorship. One, online censorship profoundly impacts Chinese citizens' freedom of opinion and expression. Two, both Chinese and US companies contribute to online censorship. And three, censorship is linked to repression in and outside China. I will conclude with recommendations for how the United States government can demand accountability from perpetrators and provide assistance to victims.

First, the Chinese government severely restricts Chinese citizens' freedom of opinion and expression through online censorship. Inside China, authorities block access to thousands of websites, including foreign media, human rights organizations, and the website of this very Commission. One of the clearest measurements of state-mandated censorship comes from Great Firewall Watch, a platform created by researchers at Stony Brook, the University of Massachusetts - Amherst, UC Berkeley, and the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto. Since its inception in March 2020, GFWatch.org has discovered more than 640,000 blocked domains.

Censorship is pervasive even on platforms accessible in China. Yet while authorities stipulate what content is prohibited, it is tech companies themselves which are responsible for day-to-day censorship. Citizen Lab researchers have discovered over 60,000 censorship rules on eight China-accessible search platforms, rules which fully or partially censor search results for key terms, including references to human rights abuses and criticisms of the Communist Party. Citizen Lab researchers have also detailed how platforms censor discussion of political events, including activism in Hong Kong, crackdowns on human rights lawyers, and COVID-19.

Second, it is not only Chinese companies which are responsible for censorship. Citizen Lab research shows that the Chinese version of Microsoft's Bing, the only major non-Chinese search engine accessible in China, engages in extensive censorship. In China, Bing only displays censored search results for authorized websites. Bing targets political material related to Xi Jinping and religious material related to banned spiritual movements. Furthermore, Citizen Lab researchers found that Bing's censorship of search suggestions, though not search results, was applied to users in the United States and other countries for at least eight months from October

2021 to May 2022. Bing's extensive censorship shows that US tech companies cannot introduce services in China without integrating restrictions on expression and that these restrictions will be applied to users outside of China.

Third, online censorship is linked to offline harms. As detailed by Citizen Lab researchers, a 2019-2021 harassment campaign used Chinese social media to distribute personal information about Hong Kong activists. Victims are also outside China. This Commission has previously discussed the Chinese government's silencing of overseas critics through transnational repression. On Chinese and US social media, state-backed proxies and online nationalists harass Chinese, Hong Kong, Tibetan, Uyghur, and other diaspora members. Since 2009, Citizen Lab researchers have investigated digital attacks and espionage against Tibetan diaspora communities. Some of the most vicious instances of digital transnational repression are directed at women. As Citizen Lab researchers have documented, Chinese and Hong Kong women activists in Canada have suffered online threats of physical and sexual violence. Diaspora women in the United States, Australia, and other democracies have also been attacked online, due to their criticisms of the Chinese government.

Through online censorship, the cooperation of technology companies, and digital transnational repression, the Chinese state severely restricts the freedom of opinion and expression of people in and outside China. Addressing this problem requires holding companies responsible for their role in online censorship, and supporting victims of digital harassment and intimidation.

Therefore, I recommend that the United States government do three things:

One, publicly request that Microsoft and other US companies like Apple explain how they implement political and religious censorship on their platforms in China.

Two, publicly request that Microsoft explain how political and religious censorship was applied to the search suggestions of users outside China and what safeguards will ensure this will not reoccur.

And three, train US government officials, including law enforcement and immigration authorities, to recognize digital transnational repression and properly assist victims and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions and comments.