

The 'Great Firewall'

China has been stepping up its internet censorship. The crackdown is part of a wider effort by President Xi Jinping to consolidate power.

BY PATRICIA SMITH

The signs of a crackdown were unmistakable. Over the summer, two popular Chinese websites hosting foreign TV shows and movies were wiped clean. Soon after that, WhatsApp was partly blocked by Chinese censors. And in November, Skype disappeared from download sites.

China, an authoritarian country where information is tightly controlled, has long had an uneasy relationship with the internet. Recognizing its importance for the economy, officials haven't cut off access, as some repressive countries have done. Instead, China has allowed its citizens to go online, but with limits on what they can see.

However, over the past several months, the Chinese government has expanded online censorship—perhaps fearing that too much unfiltered information could one day lead to challenges against China's one-party Communist system.

"It does appear the crackdown is becoming more intense, but the internet is also more powerful than it has ever been," says Emily Parker, an expert on the internet in China.

No Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat

China has become an economic powerhouse, but it still keeps a tight lid on dissent and denies basic freedoms to its 1.3 billion people. Political opponents are routinely imprisoned, and criticism of the government isn't tolerated. China controls the internet through a complex system of filters and censors known collectively as "the Great Firewall." (It's a play on the Great Wall of China, a series of massive fortifications built thousands of years ago that are still a major tourist attraction.) The Great Firewall involves tens of thousands of government workers monitoring social media and blocking some websites altogether, especially ones where Chinese could access material that's critical of their leaders. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google, Snapchat, and many foreign news sites including *The New York Times* are blocked in China.



Chinese police check ID cards at an internet cafe in Zaozhuang.

What's behind the latest crackdown? China experts say it's part of a wider effort by President Xi Jinping (*"shee jeen ping"*) to consolidate his power in a way that no Chinese leader has in decades. Since becoming president in 2012, Xi has tightened his grip on China's massive military and taken a more aggressive stand with smaller nations in the region. He's also used an anti-corruption campaign to purge Chinese officials he considers disloyal. And Xi's government is mandating that loyalty to the Communist party be a larger

of China

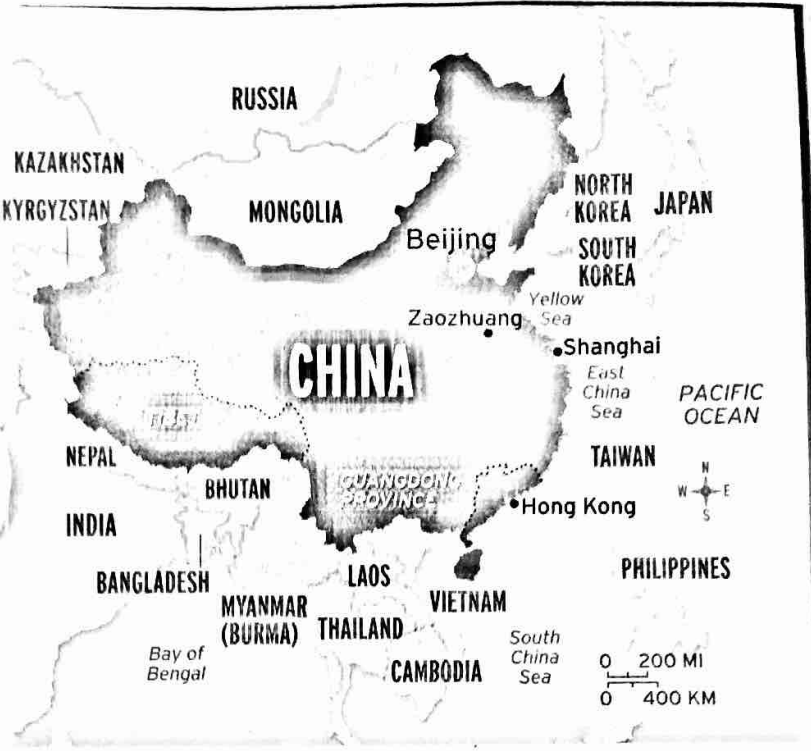


part of the curriculum in China's 283,000 schools.

All this is prompting comparisons between Xi and China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong (see "Is Xi the New Mao?" page 17), who once exerted virtually unchecked authority over the nation.

But Mao ruled China in an era when it was easier to keep a lid on information. Is that still possible when the internet provides instant access to the world?

Millions of Chinese people have used special software to



construct what are known as VPNs (virtual private networks) that enable them to access blocked material.

"There are definitely ways to jump over the firewall," says Parker. "If you really want to get onto Facebook, for example, you can find a way."

What seems to be different about the current crackdown is that authorities are targeting VPNs and other tools used to get around the Great Firewall. Several popular Chinese VPNs have been shut down, and at the request of the Chinese government, Apple and Amazon have stopped offering their Chinese customers access to VPN software. Both companies have faced sharp criticism for yielding to Chinese censorship. The companies say it's better to continue to do business in China, even if Chinese don't have full access to their products.

In a case that sent a warning to Chinese who try to defy the censors, a 26-year-old man from Guangdong province was sentenced to nine months in jail last March for selling VPN software.

"What they're worried about is people using the internet to organize," Parker says. "They're worried about hundreds of thousands of people saying, 'We're upset about environmental damage' or whatever and 'let's get together and protest.'"

Perhaps that's why officials seem to be so sensitive to any online criticism of President Xi, no matter how subtle. The government even cracked down recently on social media references to Winnie-the-Pooh after some commentators said Xi resembled the children's book character. Now mentions and images of Pooh are all blocked.

Tech vs. Tyranny

Politically repressive regimes have always been wary of new technologies that gave people ways to push back against tyranny. In the 18th century, the printing press was a key factor in the American Revolution because it enabled the widespread distribution of political pamphlets that stirred

up unrest against England's King George III. In fact, some scholars have said that the printing press was critical in creating a sense of national consciousness among the colonists.

During the Cold War (1947-91), Communist governments in places like the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China feared that news from the outside world would spread notions of freedom. They kept their citizens in the dark by censoring state-run newspapers and TV stations.

But the newest technologies spread information at light speed, making them even more potent threats to the status quo. During the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, protesters used social media to organize mass demonstrations and draw the world's attention, as longtime despots were swept from power. Later that year, officials in Egypt shut down the entire country's internet for five days to thwart protesters.

China can't simply block access to the web without causing major damage to its economy, which was transformed when the country embraced free enterprise four decades ago. Those economic reforms have fueled explosive growth, and China now has the second-largest economy in the world, after that of the United States. China's factories export products like electronics and clothing worldwide, and its companies



'If you really want to get onto Facebook, you can find a way.'

rely on the web to stay connected.

But Chinese officials have found other ways to keep out unwanted viewpoints. China has forced several video streaming sites popular with young people to remove most of their American, British, Japanese, and South Korean TV shows and movies. The government also shut down some celebrity gossip websites. It's part of a push to make online content adhere to the government's "core socialist values."

A Game of Cat & Mouse

In a game of cat and mouse, some Chinese have still found ways around censorship, only to have the government respond with new screening technologies. Traditionally, China's army of censors have used word-screening software to identify objectionable content on social media, so some people began posting photos or videos (rather than text) as a way around that. In response, cyber police seem to have developed the ability to delete photos from social media chats in real time as they're being transmitted.

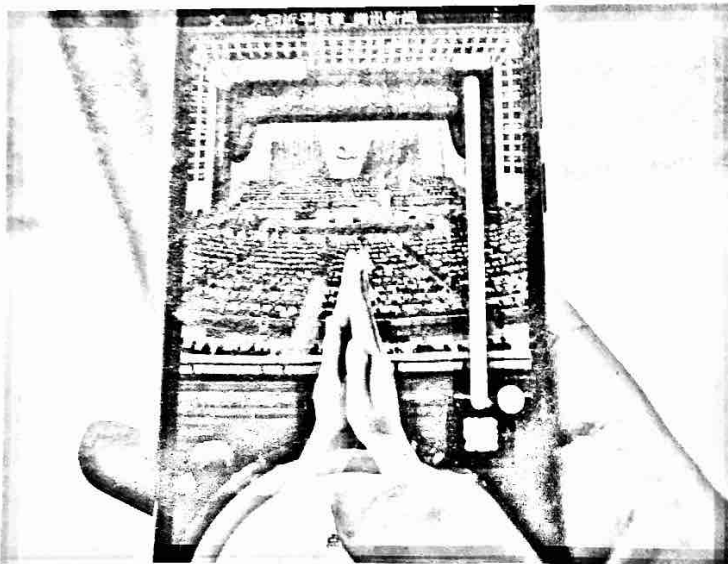
This suggests that the government has developed software to do this screening, rather than relying on human censors, according to Citizen Lab, a human-rights research group that tracks internet censorship. And that has some people concerned.

"If you hire a million network police, it still wouldn't be enough to filter 1.4 billion people's messages," Bao Pu, a Hong Kong-based publisher, told the *Wall Street Journal*. "But if you have a machine doing it, it can instantly block everything."

With China's population becoming increasingly internet-savvy, some wonder whether China's attempt to control the web can ultimately succeed.

"That's the million-dollar question," says Parker, the internet expert. "I think China is cracking down on the internet because they understand how powerful—and how potentially threatening—the internet is." •

With reporting by Paul Mozur of The Times.



THE CLAP APP

Hoping to attract the attention of millions of young tech-savvy Chinese, China's Communist Party has created dozens of apps to instill party loyalty. And private companies are jumping on the bandwagon too, eager to show their loyalty. Chinese internet giant Tencent recently created the "Clap for Xi Jinping" app, allowing users to hear a clip of Xi's speech at the Communist Party Congress and then tap the screen to clap—as many times as possible within 19 seconds. People have used the app to clap more than a billion times so far.



IS XI THE NEW MAO?

These portraits have all over China, helping to create a cult of personality around both leaders.

Both photos have been airbrushed to hide flaws and look more like paintings. Mao and Xi both look at the viewer with kind expressions.

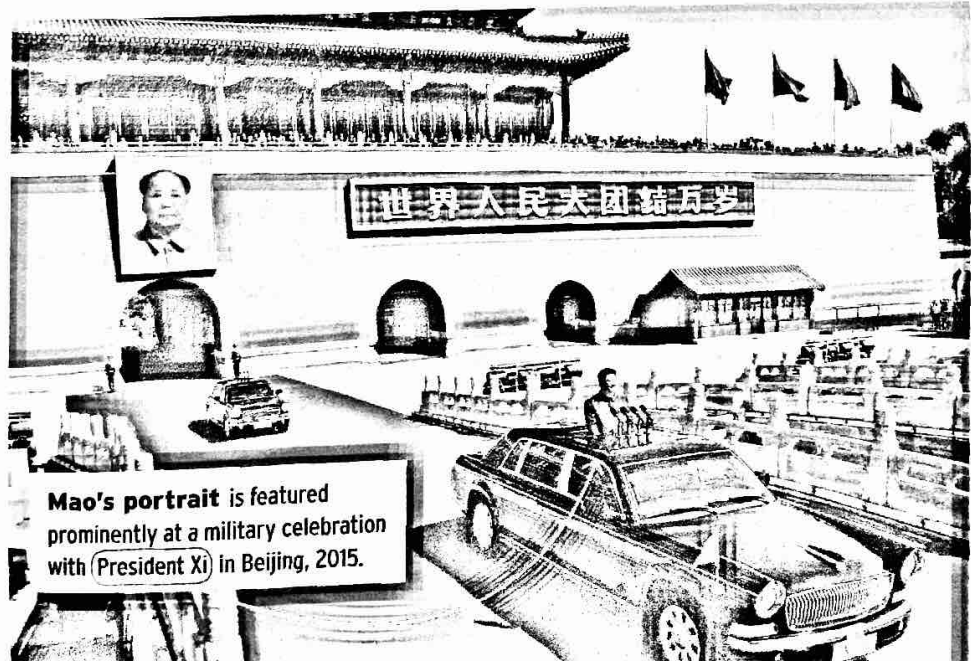
President Xi wears a business suit, reflecting today's more capitalist China.

President Xi Jinping is everywhere in China. His portrait hangs in shops, restaurants, and many people's homes. Schoolchildren learn his sayings. And his speeches dominate the evening news. Xi has become the most powerful Chinese leader in decades. And this is prompting comparisons to Mao Zedong, China's revolutionary leader (1949-76). At the height of the Mao era, people displayed his image everywhere—in their homes and workplaces, and even

on badges worn on their clothing. His fatherly image (see above) helped give Mao a god-like status in the eyes of many Chinese. Like Mao, Xi is popular, charismatic, and self-confident. His family history

Mao's fatherly image helped give him a god-like status in the eyes of many Chinese.

is one reason for that. His father was one of the founders of the People's Republic in 1949, and Xi grew up amid Communist elites. Xi has published a book about his experiences as a young man sent to the countryside under Mao in order to become a better Communist. The book, which recounts his days shoveling manure and sleeping in flea-infested caves, has given Xi a heroic aura and helped increase his popularity. At the Communist Party Congress in October, where Xi was given another five-year term as president, the Communist Party also wrote Xi's ideas into the party constitution. The only other Chinese leaders whose ideas have been enshrined are Mao and Deng Xiaoping (1978-89), who launched the economic reforms responsible for China's massive growth. Xi's beliefs will now infuse every aspect of party ideology in government, the media, and school textbooks.



Mao's portrait is featured prominently at a military celebration with (President Xi) in Beijing, 2015.

"This is a way of trying to project his historic stature," Chinese political analyst Wu Qiang says of Xi. He adds, "I think it's intended to give him an ideological status that can't be challenged, like Mao in that sense."