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## **SCALING THE GREAT FIREWALL OF CHINA: USES AND GRATIFICATIONS FOR CIRCUMVENTING STATE-IMPOSED INTERNET BOUNDARIES**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the motivation of Chinese Internet users for circumventing state-imposed Internet restrictions – a practice called *fanqiang* (to scale the Great Firewall of China). It fills an important gap in our knowledge of state-imposed Internet controls in China which has been dominated by discussions on technological dimensions and implications on the public sphere. Through a series of focus group interviews with Chinese Internet users in Guangzhou, the study in this paper found *fanqiang* to be driven by more deliberative motives – largely information-seeking but also, to a smaller extent, entertainment and social utility. Our findings clarify the nature of users’ information-seeking motive for *fanqiang*. Unsurprisingly, research participants reported that they *fanqiang* to search for news outside China, expressing their distrust of the account of the official media on events in the country. But contrary to conventional wisdom, we found that the desire for political or other forms of sensitive content was not the most salient motive for circumventing Internet restrictions. The desire for politically sensitive information was largely driven by curiosity rather than personal values; it was stronger when individuals initially *fanqiang* but is attenuated after the initial novelty of the “forbidden fruit” wears off. Furthermore, the information routinely sought by research participants outside the Great Firewall was neither politically sensitive nor falling within the officially expressed categories of undesirable materials. Overall, our findings suggest that the desire for more complete knowledge provides a clearer picture of Chinese Internet users’ information-seeking motive for *fanqiang*.

### **Introduction**

This paper speaks to the conference theme on boundaries through an examination of those imposed by the state on Internet users’ online activities in China. Internet censorship in China is mainly operated through the Great Firewall, officially known as the Golden Shield Project, which blocks undesirable content and sites through firewalls and proxy servers. Websites that are completely or partially banned by the Great Firewall not only include sexually explicit and religious sites but notably, social media

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sites based in the West such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Yahoo. These restrictions have led to the rise of fanqiang, which literally means “scaling the wall” in Chinese. Internet users typically fanqiang by connecting to certain proxy servers or virtual private networks based overseas. Hitherto, the attention of both scholars and commentators on Internet censorship in China has mostly been focused on its technological dimensions (e.g., MacKinnon, 2011; Bailey & Labovitz, 2011) and its implications on the public sphere (e.g., Diamond, 2012). The motivations of Internet users for engaging in fanqiang, however, have been implicitly assumed and largely neglected. This paper thus fills an important gap in our knowledge of state-imposed Internet controls in China by exploring the motivations of Chinese Internet users for fanqiang.

## **Methodological Framework**

Our investigation is guided by the uses and gratifications perspective, which assumes that people are active and goal-directed in their usage of the media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The perspective is well suited for studying the highly deliberative activity of circumventing state-imposed restrictions in Internet use. Owing to the lack of empirically established motives in this area, focus group interviews were conducted with research participants (N = 24, aged 21 to 30) from the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou to explore the motives of Chinese Internet users for fanqiang.

## **Summary of Findings**

As with previous studies on the uses and gratifications for Internet use (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), we found users’ motives for fanqiang to fall within the categories of information-seeking (e.g., view external news sites), entertainment (e.g., play online games), and social utility (e.g., connect to Facebook). Several research participants mentioned that they fanqiang to look up information for professional or academic purposes. Unlike regular Internet use, Fanqiang is a tedious cat-and-mouse game between censors and users; each side has to constantly update their circumvention or counter-circumvention techniques in response to moves by the other sides. Users who regularly circumvent Internet restrictions, particularly to access politically sensitive sites, also risk getting into trouble with the authorities monitoring such activities. It is therefore unsurprisingly that less deliberative motives such as escape and pass-time were not expressed by research participants.

## **Discussion**

An important contribution of this paper is to clarify the nature of users’ information-seeking motives for fanqiang. An obvious reason for fanqiang is to access politically sensitive information and news not available within China. Our findings do indicate that research participants fanqiang to search for news reports outside China, expressing their distrust of the account of the official media on events transpiring in the country. However, the implicit assumption that people circumvent Internet restrictions to access politically sensitive content in extant literature (e.g., Taneja, 2013) is probably overplayed. The search for political or other forms of information deemed sensitive to

the authorities is not necessarily the most salient motive for circumventing Internet restrictions. Our findings indicate that seeking sensitive information was largely driven by curiosity rather than personal values. We found that the desire to seek politically sensitive information may be stronger when individuals initially engage in fanqiang but is attenuated after the initial novelty of the “forbidden fruit” wears off. Our findings further indicate that the desire for more complete information as opposed to the desire for restricted content offers a clearer picture of Chinese Internet users’ informational needs for fanqiang. Although research participants reported circumventing Internet controls in order to access restricted information (e.g., news on sensitive topics), the type of information sought also included ordinarily unrestricted information (e.g., sports instruction) that happens to be found on a restricted platform such as certain social network sites or search engines.

By elucidating people’s motives for fanqiang, this paper helps to inform the debate concerning Internet censorship and its impact on society. Some form of Internet censorship exists in many countries but few as extensive as that in China which has the largest number of Internet users in the world. Internet controls in China have mainly been targeted at restricting the spread of pornography, gambling, hate speech, and “counterrevolutionary” materials such as those concerning the 1989 Tiananmen Square, Falun Gong, and Free Tibet movements (Harwit & Clark, 2001; Jujaroen, 2010; Lacharite, 2002). Such undesirable materials are deemed detrimental to social harmony by the Beijing authorities (Lagerkvist, 2010). Yet, state-imposed Internet restrictions not only represent an affront to basic freedoms but also a major inconvenience to the legitimate activities of Internet users. In this paper, we found that the information routinely sought by research participants outside the Great Firewall was neither politically sensitive nor falling within the officially expressed categories of undesirable materials. Our findings thus question the legitimacy of both explicit and implicit justifications for the state-imposed restrictions on Internet use.

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