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Day 6

with Brent Bambury



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How censors are keeping Chinese citizens in the dark about "Black Monday"



(The Associated Press)



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This week's big stock market fall in China sent shockwaves throughout North American and European markets. It was the worst of its kind since 2007, and most pundits and economists pointed to weakness in the Chinese economy as a major factor.

But thanks to Chinese state-run media and censorship, mentions of the country's economic weakness were pretty much absent from major Chinese media reports. Authorities are blocking what people can search about the market crash, and to take down information that the regime doesn't approve of.

Charlie Smith is part of a group of activists who operate GreatFire.org, a website that unblocks censored online information and makes it accessible to people in China. We agreed to use a pseudonym and disguise his voice because he's concerned for his safety.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Brent Bambury: So you republish censored information deleted by authorities. Charlie, as markets crash this week, what are people saying on Weibo and social networks that you had to re-post because it got taken down by censors?

Charlie Smith: Well first of all Brent, let me just tell you what information you can find. You can find information that is basically the official government line about what is causing the stock market crash. So on Monday, the official line was to blame a global economic downturn for the stock market crash on Monday, and on Tuesday the authorities blamed underground banks for flooding the stock market with grey money. On Wednesday, the authorities arrested bankers who had released negative information about China's stock markets and they blamed them for the crash in the stock market.

BB: So they're not taking any responsibility. Are people pointing that out online?

CS: Well you have to remember there hasn't really been a long history of stock market trading in China, so a lot of Chinese citizens believe the government should be doing more to prop up the stock market. But there are also people who are saying that actually the government shouldn't be involved at all in propping up the stock market, and the stock market should be operating like a free market as it does in other countries. Regardless of what your opinion is on either side, it's getting deleted if it doesn't match the official party line.

BB: And presumably some of the people making these comments are people who may have lost money or whose lives are being affected by the economic crisis this week. How much anger are they directing towards the government in the comments that you're finding?

CS: There is a lot of anger directed towards the government. People in China who don't have enough money to buy real estate have turned to the stock market as a way to boost their savings and the government has encouraged investment in the stock market. A lot of those people have suffered pretty big losses this week, and I think they are looking at the government to prop up the market and keep it afloat.

BB: There has been very limited coverage of the stock market crash in the media. It's limited to what you described earlier, but there has been lots of coverage of this military parade slated for next week in Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. How is that going over with Chinese citizens and investors?

CS: Well the Chinese censorship authorities actually have a pretty tough job. When it rains, it pours. So before the stock market crash they were cracking down on controlling messages around the parade. And they've actually put in a lot of physical security measures in big cities around China, and have taken steps online to crackdown on circumvention tools that people are using to jump over the great firewall. So the government is probably working overtime because they have to deal with handling information on the stock market and also dealing with information surrounding the parade. Of course, Chinese citizens are tying both of these things together and saying, "why are the authorities putting on this great parade when the country's stock markets are in turmoil", and it is the the number one topic of discussion. Nobody is talking about the parade, everybody has been talking about the stock market.

BB: What message do you think the authorities are trying to send right now with this display of military might?

CS: China is a proud nation and China has a proud history. There's also a history of using events like this to boost everyone's sense of self-worth in the country. They love these big events. They love things like the Olympics and they are happy to win in other Olympics. I guess they never pass up an opportunity to have a big party, and this was one such opportunity to do that. I believe that the authorities believe this will help to boost public morale.

BB: But do you think they're also trying to suppress dissent, because we spoke with you back in October about the online censorship that was happening around the Hong Kong student protests. Do you have any indication that censorship has gotten worse since October?

CS: Yeah I wish I could tell you otherwise, but actually censorship has definitely gotten worse since that time. In January we started to see this crackdown on circumvention tools with the disruption of VPNs, which are virtual private networks. And that has increased over the past week when the authorities were actually targeting developers who wrote code that's used in circumvention tools.

BB: What about the massive explosions in Tianjin earlier this month? There was the devaluation of the yuan, now the stock market crash. Do you think that the government is more sensitive to criticism right now than they have been in

the past?

CS: Absolutely. I think probably one of the most common remarks on Chinese social media is where is Xi Jinping in all of this? Why isn't he the public face of the government's response to the Tianjin blast and the stock market crash? People are wondering where is the leadership at this critical time, and that's exactly the kind of message they don't want to be spread around social media.

BB: Charlie as censorship intensifies, do you feel a heightened sense of danger for the work you're doing?

CS: Well, I think this week actually when we saw that the software developers were getting knocks on the doors at home, we felt grateful that we've been doing this project anonymously. Actually, we are now encouraging Chinese developers who may be operating in this space or anything remotely related to the space to take the steps to do their work anonymously as well.

BB: Charlie thanks for talking to us.

CS: Thank you Brent.

Day 6 also spoke to Charlie Smith in October 2014, about unblocking censored content during the Hong Kong student protests. Listen to that interview [here](#).

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