

Censored Contagion II: A Timeline of Information Control on Chinese Social Media During COVID-19 | The Citizen Lab

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August 2020 marks over half a year since the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. From the beginning of the pandemic, we have been tracking censorship related to COVID-19 on Chinese social media platforms.

In March, we released a report documenting censorship on WeChat (the preeminent chat application in China) and YY (a popular Chinese live streaming platform) between December 2019 and February 2020. On YY, we found that censorship of COVID-19 content on the platform started on December 31, 2019 at the very start of the outbreak. On WeChat, we documented a broad scope of censored COVID-19 content ranging from criticism of the government to general health information.

Since the publication of that report, we have conducted daily tests on WeChat and collected 2,174 censored keywords related to COVID-19 between January 18 through May 14, 2020 (see Appendix for details on our methods). This data provides a view into how narratives and messaging on the pandemic are controlled and molded on social media in China. In this report, we present a timeline that groups a selection of censored keywords into themes representing key milestones over the last six months of the pandemic revealing a censored history of COVID-19. To supplement this timeline, we include digital illustrations such as comics or cartoons that we found censored on WeChat Moments related to COVID-19 and China's handling of the outbreak. These illustrations were originally collected from Twitter between March 30 and May 22, 2020.

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