The Impact of Media Censorship: 1984 or Brave New World?

Media censorship is a hallmark of authoritarian regimes. We conduct a field experiment in China to measure the effects of providing citizens with access to an uncensored Internet. We track subjects’ media consumption, beliefs regarding the media, economic beliefs, political attitudes, and behaviors over 18 months. We find four main results: (i) free access alone does not induce subjects to acquire politically sensitive information; (ii) temporary encouragement leads to a persistent increase in acquisition, indicating that demand is not permanently low; (iii) acquisition brings broad, substantial, and persistent changes to knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and intended behaviors; and (iv) social transmission of information is statistically significant but small in magnitude. We calibrate a simple model to show that the combination of low demand for uncensored information and the moderate social transmission means China’s censorship apparatus may remain robust to a large number of citizens receiving access to an uncensored Internet.

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