

SPECIAL FEATURE

Cyberdisappearance in Action

In recent months, as prominent activists and lawyers have been abducted by Chinese security forces, the editors of the *China Media Bulletin* noted corresponding censorship directives and other restrictions that effectively reduced the detained individuals' presence on the Chinese internet, a practice that might be termed “cyberdisappearance.”

To investigate this phenomenon in greater detail, the editors selected a sample of eight prominent activists, lawyers, and journalists, many of whom have used the internet as part of their activism. Freedom House staff then conducted searches for their names on Google.hk (a Hong Kong–based site that is largely free of Chinese Communist Party censorship) and compared the results to those produced by Baidu.com, the dominant Chinese search engine; Yahoo.cn, the China-based version of the U.S. internet portal; and the search function of China's popular Sina Weibo microblogging service—all three of which are subject to Communist Party restrictions. Although Yahoo.cn represents less than 1 percent of China's search-engine market, it was included because its performance demonstrates the censorship requirements imposed on foreign internet companies seeking to operate in China.

The aim of the test was to simulate the experience of an average Chinese user who has heard the activists' names and wants to learn more about them. While both the censorship apparatus and netizens are often sophisticated enough to identify terms that refer to activists indirectly, without using their actual names, *China Media Bulletin* editors felt that a name-based test nevertheless provides some sense of the user experience.

The findings reveal not just clear evidence of significant restrictions, but also the nuance with which the Chinese censorship apparatus imposes those restrictions. Ultimately, they provide a window into the distorted version of reality available to most Chinese internet users, as well as the Communist Party's extensive efforts to isolate activists who cross an ever-shifting red line and limit their access to large audiences.

Below are brief profiles of the selected activists, followed by a chart summarizing the results of the search-engine tests. In addition to the results related to each individual, several broad trends emerged from the testing:

- **Heavy restrictions on Sina Weibo.** For seven of the eight names tested, Sina Weibo provided no search results on the activists in question. By way of explanation, users are presented with the following message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”
- **Yahoo.cn matches or exceeds the restrictions on Baidu.** Despite being part of a U.S.-based company, Yahoo.cn produces search results that are as heavily restricted and dominated by Chinese government links as those of Baidu, which holds over 80 percent of the domestic search market. In some cases, Yahoo.cn appears to be even more restrictive than Baidu.
- **A nuanced spectrum of restrictions, corresponding to perceived political sensitivity.** For those who have fallen seriously out of favor with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—like Gao Zhisheng, Ai Weiwei, and Liu Xiaobo—search results are heavily censored, and there is almost no access to their writings. For others who have run into official repression but are not yet considered “enemies”—like Teng Biao, Jiang Tianyong, and Chang Ping—censorship is more nuanced. Chinese users may still have access to many of their writings, but the available material may be limited to topics deemed acceptable by the CCP. For example, their advocacy for Tibetans or Falun Gong practitioners would be proscribed, but their work on death penalty or corruption cases would remain online. Even for the activists considered to be more politically sensitive—such as Gao Zhisheng, Ai Weiwei, and Chen Guangcheng—information about their careers before they ran afoul of the authorities may still be available.
- **The number of search results on Google.hk or Yahoo.hk is far greater than on Baidu.com or Yahoo.cn.** In some instances, millions or hundreds of thousands of results appear on the outside search engines, while only a few dozen or hundred appear on the mainland Chinese sites. Whether the difference is due to the companies' respective algorithms or deliberate censorship, the effect is that Chinese people using local search engines have a much more limited range of information at their disposal, not only in terms of quality, but also of quantity.

Activist Profiles

Liu Xiaobo: Democracy advocate and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Liu was active in the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement and has since called for political reforms and the end of one-party rule in his online writings. He was among the drafters of the Charter 08 prodemocracy manifesto and assisted in its circulation online. Having already been repeatedly detained, Liu was arrested in December 2008 and charged with inciting subversion of state power. A year later, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison for his online writings and Charter 08 participation. He remains incarcerated as a political prisoner.

Gao Zhisheng: Human rights attorney and dissident. Gao defended the full range of Chinese victims of abuse, but especially religious believers. In 2001, the Ministry of Justice named him one of China's top 10 lawyers. In 2005, he published open letters documenting the torture and killing of Falun Gong adherents. He was subsequently disbarred and detained by the Chinese government several times, and suffered torture while in detention. Gao was abducted again in April 2010 and has not been heard from since.

Ai Weiwei: Internationally renowned artist and activist. Ai designed the Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and investigated corruption, especially surrounding the collapse of poorly constructed school buildings in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. He is known for using the internet to circulate videos and messages that are critical of the Chinese government. Ai has been under growing pressure since 2009. He was detained at a Beijing airport on April 3, 2011, and held incommunicado. Following international objections, he was released in June, but still faces charges of "economic crimes."

Hu Jia: Environmental and HIV/AIDS activist, winner of the European Parliament's 2008 Sakharov Prize. Hu is a former director of the Beijing Aizhixing Institute, an AIDS advocacy group, and founder of another nonprofit. He was outspoken about Chinese government human rights abuses ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and testified to the European Parliament by video-chat. He was detained in December 2007 and sentenced to three and a half years in prison in April 2008, on charges of "inciting subversion of state power." He was released in late June 2011 but remains under house arrest.

Teng Biao: Law professor and human rights attorney. Teng has defended a wide range of clients and was part of the legal teams for Chen Guangcheng, a death penalty defendant, and several Falun Gong cases. He is one of the founders of the Open Constitution Initiative, a public-interest law nonprofit, and is widely known for his Twitter and blog posts tracking legal cases. Teng had the renewal of his license to practice law rejected in 2008 and was later abducted for several days. He was detained again in February 2011 and held for over two months. He remains under tight surveillance.

Chen Guangcheng: Blind 'barefoot lawyer' and human rights activist. Chen informally taught himself law and then helped draw international attention to human rights abuses in rural areas, especially cases of forced abortion and sterilization in Linyi Prefecture, Shandong Province. Chen was arrested in June 2006, then sentenced to four years and three months in prison on charges that were widely viewed as trumped up. He was released in September 2010, but has been kept under strict house arrest. Chen and his wife were beaten in February 2011 after having a video on their living conditions smuggled out and posted online.

Chang Ping: Journalist and commentator. From 2001 to 2008, Chang worked as deputy chief editor for the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a liberally oriented state-owned subsidiary newspaper in Guangdong. He published commentary pieces on corruption and nepotism among local Chinese officials, and in 2008 he authored a piece criticizing government policy in Tibet. Chang was subsequently removed from his position as deputy chief editor and dismissed as a commentator, but he retained a research position at the media group. He was barred from writing commentaries altogether in July 2010, and then forced to quit his job in January 2011.

Jiang Tianyong: Human rights attorney. Jiang took on a high-profile case defending a Tibetan Buddhist cleric against charges linked to ethnic unrest in 2008. He has also represented clients with HIV/AIDS, petitioners, and Falun Gong practitioners. In October 2009, he testified before the U.S. Congress. Jiang's legal license renewal was rejected in May 2009, and he has been periodically detained in recent years. He was abducted on February 19, 2011, and released on April 20.

Test Results

Activist name	Google.hk (Chinese, uncensored)	Key findings from China-based search engines	Sina Weibo microblog	Number of results
<p>Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波)</p> <p><i>Democracy advocate and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate</i></p>	<p>3/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Liu on Wikipedia; references to Liu's jailing, Nobel Peace Prize, Charter 08; Xinhua article condemning Liu's selection for Nobel Peace Prize; Liu's final court statement prior to sentencing</p>	<p>Very tight restrictions, state-dominated results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yahoo.cn: error message • Baidu: 20/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; critical comments and news compilation about Liu and the Nobel Peace Prize being politicized; no links to Liu's own writings 	<p>Search returns no result and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p>Uncensored Google.hk: 1,670,000 Yahoo.hk: 501,000</p> <p>Censored Baidu.com: 762,000 Yahoo.cn: N/A</p>
<p>Gao Zhisheng (高智晟)</p> <p><i>Human rights attorney and dissident</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Gao on Wikipedia; references to Gao “missing” or his “forced disappearance”; YouTube video of Gao relaying account of abuse in custody</p>	<p>Very tight restrictions, completely dominated by state-run news</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baidu and Yahoo.cn: 20/20 top results are govt info or state-run media content; references to Gao as a criminal or to his comments on cases prior to 2006, when he fell out of favor with the government; no links to Gao's writings or open letters 	<p>Search returns no result and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p>Uncensored Google.hk: 2,250,000 Yahoo.hk: 3,650,000</p> <p>Censored Baidu.com: 495 Yahoo.cn: 97</p>
<p>Ai Weiwei (艾未未)</p> <p><i>Internationally renowned artist and activist</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Ai on Wikipedia; Ai's blog and Twitter account; information on Ai's artwork; news compilation on Ai's detention</p>	<p>Very tight restrictions, largely dominated by state-run news; Yahoo.cn results more state-dominated than Baidu</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baidu: 2/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; information on Ai's artwork; Ai's bio on Baidu encyclopedia; news on Ai's detention and “economic crimes” • Yahoo.cn: 20/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; some items on Ai's artwork; news compilation criticizing Ai 	<p>Search returns no results and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p>Uncensored Google.hk: 9,140,000 Yahoo.hk: 9,480,000</p> <p>Censored Baidu.com: 2,550,000 Yahoo.cn: 1,283</p>
<p>Hu Jia (胡佳)</p> <p><i>Environmental and HIV/AIDS activist</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Hu on Wikipedia; Hu's arrest and prison sentence; speculation on Hu receiving Nobel Peace Prize in 2008; news on Chinese Olympic diver with same name</p>	<p>Limited information about Hu Jia the activist within top results; most are on Olympic diver with same name</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baidu: 0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; only 1/20, his Wikipedia page, is on Hu Jia the activist • Yahoo.cn: 20/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; none on the first 10 pages are about Hu Jia the activist 	<p>Search returns no results on the activist and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p> <p>Three results for people with Hu Jia in their name, including diver</p>	<p>Uncensored Google.hk: 1,970,000 Yahoo.hk: 3,860,000</p> <p>Censored Baidu.com: 1,100,000 Yahoo.cn: 2,129</p>

<p>Teng Biao (滕彪) <i>Law professor and human rights attorney</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Teng on Wikipedia; Teng’s blog and Twitter account; news compilation on Teng, with full range of activism and his detentions</p>	<p>Partial restrictions, limited state-run sources, no references to more sensitive legal work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baidu and Yahoo.cn: 0 or 1/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; Teng on Wikipedia; Teng’s blog and microblog on 163.com; Teng on a “Rate your professor” website; Teng’s statement of defense for Xia Junfeng death penalty case; poem to Teng referencing his disappearance (dated 4/19/2011) 	<p>Search returns no result and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p><u>Uncensored</u> Google.hk: 594,000 Yahoo.hk: 467,000</p> <p><u>Censored</u> Baidu.com: 165,000 Yahoo.cn: 13,999</p>
<p>Chen Guangcheng (陈光诚) <i>Blind ‘barefoot lawyer’ and human rights activist</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Chen on Wikipedia; video of Chen’s home under surveillance; Free Chen Guangcheng website; news compilation on Chen; plea from Chen’s wife</p>	<p>Limited state-run news sources, many links on early activism and repression that cannot be opened, indicating articles may have been removed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baidu and Yahoo.cn: 0 or 1/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; Chen’s bio on Wikipedia and Baidu encyclopedia; social media mention of Chen’s arrest and imprisonment; forums discussing his case and showing support for his family; reports of Chen’s activism before detention, including lawsuit against Beijing subway company, investigations in countryside, and Chen being beaten in 2005; some articles or blogs referring to Chen’s recent release and his move from a “little prison” to a “big prison” 	<p>Search returns no result and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p><u>Uncensored</u> Google.hk: 229,000 Yahoo.hk: 75,200</p> <p><u>Censored</u> Baidu.com: 46,700 Yahoo.cn: 4,260</p>
<p>Chang Ping (长平) <i>Journalist and commentator</i></p>	<p>1/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Chang on Wikipedia; Chang’s blogs and microblogs; Chang’s dismissal from his job and information on Tibet commentary; info on historical figures with same name</p>	<p>Limited state-run content and general access to Chang’s own writings, but Tibet commentary and news of dismissal buried</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baidu and Yahoo.cn: 0 or 1/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; Chang on Wikipedia; Chang’s blogs and microblogs; news articles by Chang; Chang’s bio on Baidu encyclopedia; info on historical figures with same name; no prominent mention of recent dismissal 	<p>Search returns no result and this message: “According to related laws and policy, some of the results are not shown here.”</p>	<p><u>Uncensored</u> Google.hk: 6,060,000 Yahoo.hk: 53,500</p> <p><u>Censored</u> Baidu.com: 11,000,000 Yahoo.cn: 560,667</p>
<p>Jiang Tianyong (江天勇) <i>Human rights attorney</i></p>	<p>0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content</p> <p>Examples: Jiang on Wikipedia; Jiang’s blog and Twitter page; news compilation on Jiang’s detention</p>	<p>Yahoo.cn results more state-dominated than Baidu’s, some references to Jiang’s detention and release</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yahoo.cn: 18/18 total results are govt info or state-media content, including challenge to internet pricing Baidu: 0/20 top results are govt info or state-media content; references to Jiang’s detention and release; quotes from Jiang’s Chinese microblog; Jiang’s bio on Baidu encyclopedia 	<p>Weibo page is accessible</p> <p>Most recent post was on July 12, criticizing police’s “gangster-like behavior”; multiple “taggings” of Jiang by other microbloggers</p>	<p><u>Uncensored</u> Google.hk: 215,000 Yahoo.hk: 194,000</p> <p><u>Censored</u> Baidu.com: 21,400 Yahoo.cn: 18</p>