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## Globalizing Social Media: A Study of LinkedIn in China

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### Abstract

Navigating the Chinese market is a near impossible task for most American social media companies. Be it Facebook, Instagram, or even a basic search engine like Google; a technology firm from the West attempting to crack the Chinese market is ordinarily met with a wall of government restrictions. So how can social networking sites globalize in the face of increasing regulation and censorship? More narrowly, how can professional networking websites find success in China and be beneficial to users?

### Keywords

LinkedIn, China, social media, social networking, professional networking, regulation

# Globalizing Social Media: A Study of LinkedIn in China

**Lisa Mishra**

Navigating the Chinese market is a near impossible task for most American social media companies. Be it Facebook, Instagram, or even a basic search engine like Google; a technology firm from the West attempting to crack the Chinese market is ordinarily met with a wall of government restrictions. So how can social networking sites globalize in the face of increasing regulation and censorship? More narrowly, how can professional networking websites find success in China and be beneficial to users?

## I. Background

The continued global success of social networking sites (SNSs) has made China an ideal market for Western firms to explore. Its wealth of technology-savvy young people with access to social networking media such as computers and cellular devices makes for a mutually beneficial relationship between users and firms. Not only does China have the largest online population of any country in the world at over 500 million users, it is also a leader in telecommunications and mobile devices (Arsène, 2012).

Moreover, the government of China even formally espouses the growth of Internet and technology use. The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China officially states that the Internet "is helping promote the economic and social development of China," while also helping "to publicize government information" to citizens. These same offices guarantee Chinese citizens freedom of speech on the Internet, stating that "authorities attach great importance to social conditions and public opinion as reflected on the Internet" (2010). And yet, despite these claims of complete freedom of speech and the merits of Internet use, China notoriously has a marred reputation of welcoming foreign SNSs with

open arms.

## II. Censorship in China

The history of Western technology companies in China has been anything but painless in recent years. China's intense censorship laws have made it so that several websites allowing pro-democracy and revolutionary free speech are either partially or completely inaccessible to users. A study conducted by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society found that 20% of all websites on the Internet have been blocked in some way from China's servers (Martin). One such website, and the first major SNS to experience a blockage from China, was Facebook. Following the success of mass social media organization during the Arab Spring, Chinese Facebook users from the independence movement of Xinjiang orchestrated the 2009 Ürümqi riots. Sensing Facebook as a threat, the government officially blocked the website entirely in 2009 and has not lifted the ban since (Bass, 2009). CEO Mark Zuckerberg's recent visits to China have indicated Facebook's interest in returning to China, although not at the expense of "free expression that is the backbone of Internet life" (Mozur & Goel, 2014).

Another such website that has experienced difficulties with censorship in China is YouTube. Following riots in Tibet and possible videos showing the harassment of Tibetans at the hands of Chinese policemen, China officially banned access to YouTube in 2009 (Chang, 2009). In fact, the word "Tibet" itself is blocked from search engines along with other phrases related to independent movements within the country.

In order to uphold their commitments to

freedom of speech and Internet use, China has introduced alternative SNSs in place of Western websites that are easier to regulate. Instead of YouTube, Chinese viewers may use Youku. As a direct result of China's YouTube ban, Youku is the most used video hosting service in China and boasts 500 million active users. Likewise, Chinese users can opt for RenRen if they want an experience similar to Facebook (Marketing Land Infographics, 2012). The success of these websites comes from their internal, Chinese operation. This makes regulation easier, as functioning within the constraints of Chinese censorship is mandatory. It also makes communication fluid, where it may have been lacking with Western SNSs. When a website must remove sensitive content, there need not be a middleman; communication is directly between Chinese firms and the regulators they are answerable to.

### III. LinkedIn and Human Capital

Thus far, I have discussed technology and media outlets that are recreational and used largely for social purposes. However, there exists an emerging subset of SNSs that are professional in nature. LinkedIn is perhaps the most successful such service. LinkedIn, founded in Mountain View, California in 2003 is a business-oriented social networking site. It is designed to help build a user's professional identity and to discover professional opportunities, business deals, and new ventures. LinkedIn works similarly to job search services in that it is built to provide users advantageous labor market outcomes (relative to non-users). Ideally, users are expected to connect with potential employers and secure work through these interactions.

### IV. LinkedIn in China

As mentioned earlier, social networking sites seeking to enter the Chinese market must be prepared to deal with the heavy censorship that comes with such a partnership. LinkedIn is one of the few American SNSs that has successfully begun to do business with China. Perhaps because of its narrow focus as a professional tool, it inherently has less need for censorship than a purely social website. However, this does not mean that LinkedIn has not given up considerable free expression rights in order to maintain its presence in China.

When it introduced its Chinese language version earlier this year in February, LinkedIn saw one million people join in addition to the already four million that were using the unblocked English-language site (Mozur & Goel, 2014). However, pro-democracy and anti-government stances that were expressed were trafficked, as they would be on most websites in China. These posts would be blocked to all users throughout China, although they could be seen elsewhere around the world. Using software algorithms and human reviewers, LinkedIn makes sure that it is free of politically sensitive topics.

Additionally, some of LinkedIn China's success can be related to its use of Chinese companies as channels of communication. LinkedIn China has given up 7% of its operations to two local venture capital firms, a crucial step to making sure there are ways to notify the American business of any obstacles they may face with the Chinese government (Mozur & Goel, 2014). The adjustments LinkedIn has been able to make upon entering the Chinese market have been largely successful and it continues to function without any overall website bans.

### V. Policy Implications

Professional social networking sites, like their social counterparts, should commit themselves to free expression. If indeed American SNSs want to enter the Chinese market, they must strike stronger agreements to attain these freedoms. One suggestion is that in exchange for greater shares of operation to local Chinese firms, professional SNSs be allowed to operate free of censorship laws. This could be mutually beneficial, promoting local Chinese business growth while reaping greater benefits for site users through direct and open communication.

### VI. Conclusion

Despite the relative success LinkedIn has had in China it can be argued that because of government regulated blockages on "sensitive" topics, users are not getting the full experience of utilizing a professional SNS. Such blockages inevitably hinder the website's mission of networking by disallowing users from freely communicating with one another. The censorship laws also inhibit potential employers from considering hires authentically, because their genuine opinions are not being reflected. If Chinese employ-

ers have regulated channels of communication with their potential hires, their judgment of these hires will be skewed.

Studies have shown that high limitations on censorship have been the cause of failure for many SNSs in China (Martin). LinkedIn has a dubious future in China because although it may be currently balancing Chinese censorship with user freedoms, it will ultimately be inadequately servicing its clients. It will be unappealing to recruiters seeking authentic communication with potential employees and inefficient in building networks if interactions are censored. Despite Chinese user interest, government regulation ultimately decides LinkedIn's future in the country.

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