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T018｜Can Removing Online Dissent Protect Society from Rumors?

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Rumors can ruin lives. A false report of a contaminated food supply can empty supermarket shelves in an afternoon; a fabricated warning of an explosion can send a crowd running for the exits. When falsehoods travel at the speed of a share button, the instinct to remove them — and to remove the accounts that spread them — feels like common sense. The Chinese government's 2022 white paper on cyberspace gives that instinct official form, describing a "clean and sound cyber environment" as being "in the interests of the people, whereas a polluted and degenerate one is against the public interests," and recording a "robust mechanism for coordinating cyber law enforcement to crack down on telecom and online fraud, online gambling, online pyramid selling, internet misinformation, cyberbullying, and other crimes." The case for removing online dissent rests on a simple equation: fewer dissenting voices spreading unverified claims means fewer rumors, and fewer rumors means a safer society.

That equation is half right, and the half that is wrong matters more than the half that is right. Rumors are dangerous, and no serious defender of free expression argues that deliberate, harmful falsehoods should circulate without any response. But removing dissent is not the same as removing falsehood — and the white paper itself supplies the standard for judging its own approach. In its statement of basic principles, it declares: "Cyberspace, like the real world, values both freedom and order. Freedom is the purpose of order, and order is the guarantee of freedom." If freedom is the purpose of order, then an anti-rumor measure cannot be judged only by how much order it produces. It must also be judged by how much freedom survives it — including the freedom to be wrong, to be early, and to disagree with the official account while the facts are still being established.

The first problem is that dissent and rumor are not the same thing, and at the moment a decision to remove must be made, they are often indistinguishable. A rumor, in the scholarly sense, is information that has not yet been verified — not information that has been proven false. An early warning about a new disease, a leaked document, a witness account that contradicts the official version: all are unverified when they first appear, and any of them may later turn out to be true. A removal system that acts on unverified status alone will therefore delete true warnings along with false ones, and it cannot tell in advance which is which. The earliest weeks of COVID-19 in Wuhan, examined in the companion CCE article linked below, are the sharpest illustration: a doctor's private warning about a new respiratory illness was treated as rumor-spreading, and the authorities' own later investigation found the police admonition improper. The point is not to relitigate that case. Any system built to remove dissent quickly will face this collision again, because new and frightening events are precisely when verification is slowest and removal is fastest.

The second problem is who decides, and with what burden of proof. The white paper describes enforcement against "internet misinformation" and the "Qinglang" campaign to

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rectify disorder in cyberspace, and it reports the outcome approvingly: "Through these efforts, online disorder has been contained and cyberspace has been cleansed." But containment is not verification. A claim can be contained because it is false, or because it is inconvenient, or because a keyword filter cannot tell the difference. The white paper itself states that "more than one billion Chinese netizens learn what is happening across the world, express and exchange views, participate in state and social governance" online. A system that invites a billion people to express views and then removes the views it has not verified has reversed the burden of proof. The speaker must prove truth before speaking, rather than the remover proving falsity before removing. Fact-checking places the burden on the party making the judgment: show the evidence, show the reasoning, make the finding open to challenge. Removal without that discipline is not fact-checking. It is prior restraint with a tidier name.

The third problem is what happens when the remover is wrong. Every enforcement system makes mistakes, and a system that processes millions of posts a day makes a great many of them. The question is whether a person falsely accused has a remedy: review, restoration, correction, apology. The white paper's cited sections describe laws, enforcement mechanisms, campaigns, and results. They describe no procedure by which a citizen whose post was wrongly deleted can have the deletion reversed, and no remedy for the reputational or practical harm of being labelled a rumor-spreader. That silence matters: the accusation travels; the correction, if it ever comes, travels more slowly. A system that punishes quickly but corrects slowly — or not at all — will be feared even by people telling the truth, and fear produces the silence rumors need to thrive.

That is the deeper mechanism the removal argument misses. Rumors do not primarily spread because dissent exists; they spread because reliable information is absent, late, or distrusted. When official channels are slow and independent voices are removed, an information vacuum opens, and rumors rush in to fill it. Worse, removal itself can become evidence for the rumor: if a claim disappears, some readers conclude it must have been true enough to frighten the authorities. And broad keyword blocking removes corrections along with errors — the fact-checks and eyewitness corrections that are the only things that actually kill a rumor. A rumor dies when better information replaces it, in public, where people can see the evidence. Deleting the conversation does not delete the doubt; it relocates it to private chats, where no correction can reach it.

None of this means that nothing should ever be removed, or that every falsehood deserves an audience. The opposing argument is strongest exactly where it is narrowest. Some falsehoods cause immediate physical harm — a false fire alarm in a crowded hall, a fabricated contamination scare — and those justify fast action. But fast action is not the same as broad action, and punishment of the speaker is not the same as correction of the claim. The measures that actually protect a society from rumors are specific: correct the particular claim in public, with evidence, as quickly as possible; hold accountable those

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who knowingly fabricate harmful falsehoods, with the facts proven before an independent judge rather than asserted by the police officer who made the arrest; define the offence narrowly so that an honest mistake or an early warning is not a crime; and give the wrongly accused a real remedy. The companion CCE article on censorship and rumors shows prompt public correction of specific claims can work — one study it cites found a median of one day between publication and correction of debunked COVID-19 claims — without punishing the poster. Correction adds information. Removal subtracts it. A society that wants fewer rumors should prefer the tool that adds.

The white paper's own language points in this direction. "It respects the rights of netizens to exchange ideas and express their wishes, and seeks a sound cyber order in accordance with the law. Cyberspace is not an 'extrajudicial place'." A place that is not extrajudicial is one where a removal must be justified by evidence, the accused can answer, and a mistaken removal is itself treated as a wrong to be put right. Order without those procedures is not the order the white paper promises; it is order purchased with the very freedom the paper calls its purpose.

So can removing online dissent protect society from rumors? Only under conditions that bulk removal cannot meet. It can protect society if falsity is established by evidence, not assumed from unverified status; if the burden stays on the remover; if the wrongly removed have a prompt remedy; and if correction is preferred to deletion. Without them, removing dissent makes the public square quieter while making the public less informed, less able to tell truth from falsehood, and more likely to believe the next rumor — because the people and procedures that could have refuted it have already been removed.

Related reading

- CCE-085, “What Is the Relationship Between Information Censorship and the Spread of Rumors?” — https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-104-information-censorship-and-the-spread-of-rumors/
- “How Can We Verify Information Published by Official Media?” — https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-100-how-to-verify-information-published-by-official-media/

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