

# The Coordination Consequences of Media Censorship: Experimental Evidence from China

David Yang  
Harvard University

## Abstract

Media censorship ensures that information threatening the authoritarian regimes stays out of reach from their citizens. Does exposure to uncensored information affect citizens' decisions to engage in collective actions against the regime? We combine a field experiment with a series of lab experiments in China, where we randomly provide college students with free access and encouragement to browse uncensored information for 18 months. We find that treated students are significantly more likely to participate in collective actions and coordination efforts to support politically sensitive organizations. Following a global game framework, we show that the increased collective action inclination is primarily driven by changes in beliefs regarding others' actions, which in turn can be attributed to belief shifts regarding others' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences. Students tend to think others are just like themselves. As a result, exposure to uncensored information makes students more likely to believe that others are equally well informed, and share their pessimism of the economy and skepticism of the regime. These results suggest that shaping citizens' beliefs about others is an important aspect through which censorship enhances the regime stability.