



## **A Critical Analysis On Margaret E. Roberts (2018), *Censored: Distraction And Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall***

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### **Article history:**

Received: Oct 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Accepted: Jan 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020

Published: Jan 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### **Keywords:**

China

Curiosity

Human Basic Need

Information Behavior

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### **How to Cite:**

Rahayu, Karlina Restu. 2020. A Critical Analysis On Margaret E. Roberts (2018), *Censored: Distraction And Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. *Journal of Political Issues* 1(2), 92-102. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.33019/jpi.v1.i2.8>

### **ABSTRACT**

*Abstract.* Margaret E. Robert book builds on a foundation of the basic law of economy which is the relationship between supply and demand. She argues that censorship Chinese government censorship has violated free market law. In her book, she specified three mechanisms of censorship; fear, friction, and flooding (Roberts 2018). She explained in detail how Chinese's people reactions toward the censorship in chapter four, five and six. In this paper, I challenged Roberts idea that fear is not part of the censorship mechanism. I have two arguments; first fear is emotion it needs stimuli to appear. Second fear and curiosity are motivation behind information seeking. Fear appeared from negative experience while curiosity appeared from positive outcomes. Fear is part of information behavior, it works like a brake system (Heinstrom 2010). Through fear, the disappointment and punishment will be evaluated by individuals to decide the next move. Fear is something dynamic, as time evolve it creates sensitivity, but it does not stop the basic need of information. American astronaut Thomas P. Stafford mentioned that evolution made us the ultimate learning machine, and the ultimate learning machine needs to be oiled by curiosity (Stafford 2012). At the end of my paper, I suggested Roberts to consider using word threat as one of censorship mechanism rather than fear.

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### **DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.33019/jpi.v1.i2.8>

### **Lisensi:**



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**INTRODUCTION**

Beside 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tenzin Giatso, Liu Xiaobo is the only Chinese's people that had received Nobel for peace category. He accepted the prestigious award for his achievement against injustice in China without violent (Nobel 2010). One of his speech on the Nobel prize was

Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress the truth (Nobel 2010).

Liu Xiaobo died on 13 July 2017, after his death Chinese government censored his name from the internet. We can hardly find information regarding Liu Xiaobo in Chinese media. If Liu Xiaobo is still alive at the present, he will be disappointed on how pervasive censorship in Chinese media.

Tracing back to China's censorship is like tracing back to ancient China when Confucius taught 苛政猛于虎也 which means "an oppressive government is fiercer and more feared than a tiger" (Zin 2008). This idea later developed by China's government to control the public and justify the censorship. This notion best described by Tsai opinion that since 2008

Public access to network information becoming increasingly easier, the CCP has found that the old means of controlling public opinion, such as covering up, delaying, deleting and suppressing information, are gradually losing their efficiency. On that basis, in addition to continuing to delete posts, the CCP has developed more numerous and sophisticated procedures of control (Tsai 2016, 5–6)

Accordance with Tsai, Creemers illustrated that "the central element of the leadership's control strategy is to enhance society's legibility" (Creemers 2017, 95)

China's cybersecurity law was promulgated in 2016 and actively enforced in June 2017. According to Max Parasol China's government needed the law to protect the online industry, informatization, to enhance efficiency and counter economic advancing problems (Parasol 2018), but the law was arguable as an attempt to increase the internet censorship. Even though the law emphasizes on data protecting but rise tension on cyber sovereignty especially in freedom of speech, nevertheless the law provides a legal framework for the Chinese government to confirm the censorship (Qi, Shao, and Zheng 2018).

The Chinese government contends it is necessary to promote internet surveillance in order to monitoring illegal behavior (Wang and Hong 2010). With a tighter online censorship China has created a communication crisis which generates negative sentiment from its public (Cheng 2019).

Conflicting finding shows by Jia Lu et al by saying the Internet censorship and the Internet participation reject the simplified position that political trust is strengthened by the Internet censorship and the Internet participation, which is based on the cultural theory and the institutional theory (Lu, Qi, and Yu 2019, 7)

They argue that with massive information on the internet people seek for certainty, therefore, they turn to traditional authorities with more familiar and trustworthy information. Jia Liu et al research broad us to debate, cause many Chinese people to prefer to jump the great wall of China. We can find numerous scholars providing evidence on how freedom of speech activist and common people modifying the search engine and circumventing the censorship tools (Bradbury 2011; Fu and Karan 2015; Shirazi 2012; Yang and Liu 2014).

Internet censorship has profound social implication. Internet expected to create a public sphere, "people's discussion, expression of emotions and opinions as a type of online

collective action” (Chen 2015, 285). A space to interact, express yourself and communicate with others. Communication provides exchange opinions, thoughts, and meanings it is part of human rights standards (Sen 2015).

Chinese weiguan is a great example of how Chinese’s people practice citizenship, people participation in expressing emotion and opinion as part of people interaction in supervising governmental power (Xu 2015). Weibo is one of the examples, Weibo as a tool to develop new ways to connect and engage on social issues. Chinese citizen become aware of and engage in social problems thanks to the circulation of information on Weibo, and they are also able to share their views and concerns with others (Svensson 2016, 50).

Conversely, Chinese government endeavor to limited Chinese people communication, it will violate the basic law of supply and demand as argued by Roberts. One of prominent scholar in Chinese censorship discourse is Margaret E. Roberts. This paper focused on Roberts (2018) book *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China’s Great Firewall*. According to Roberts there are three mechanisms in censorship which are fear, friction and flooding.

This paper will analyze Roberts contention on the mechanism especially in fear. In my argument fear is not part of the censorship mechanism, fear is the effect from the censorship. I will use curiosity as a counterargument. Curiosity can drive people to seek an answer and truth. Fear was created by the Chinese government from the coercive power owned by the authoritarian regime, it’s not only applied for the freedom of speech activist on the internet. It can occur in any circumstances which potentially against government policy. In order have a clear discussion I will use Roberts book to answer these two questions:

1. To what extent the Chinese government can hinder the information seeking process as part of human basic need?
2. Can fear, friction, and flooding stop people from being curious about information?

In addition to the introduction, a brief outline of Roberts’s book presented in part two. Part three contains critical analysis, in this section, I will confront Roberts ideas on censorship mechanism. Final part remark with the conclusion and respond to this paper research questions.

## **BRIEF OUTLINE OF ROBERTS’S BOOK**

*Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China’s Great Firewall* is Margaret E. Roberts first book. Her book published in 2018. Besides the book, she has published 19 publications in various journals. The book contains seven chapters: introduction, a theory of censorship, censorship in China, reactions to experience with censorship, the powerful influence of information friction, information flooding: coordination as censorship, the implication for a digital world, and she provided an extra chapter for the appendix.

In the first chapter, she introduced the overview of the book, her findings, how she designed dan presented the book. She suggested future study to extend her findings especially in the impact of censorship toward democracy. Before explaining the censorship mechanism in detail in chapter four, five, and six she explains the context of her research in chapter two. The theoretical background of her research and a brief explanation on fear, friction, and flooding. Chapter three is the context of censorship in modern China started under Mao regime before the internet. In the second part, she described when China begins censorship on the internet.

Chapter four, chapter five and chapter six are the most alluring part of her book. In these parts, she explains in detail step by step the mechanism of censorship with the empirical evidence. However, compare with fear and friction, flooding is not too lengthy in term of pages numbers and she used secondary data for the empirical findings. Maybe this is related to her argument that flooding is the least identifiable censorship compare with other forms of censorship. Chapter seven is implication of her research theoretically, empirically and

methodologically. She appealed China case important to the larger context since China case can be happened in other countries.

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This paper focused on part four, five and six of Roberts book about the mechanism in China censorship. In depth, my paper will discuss mainly on Roberts first mechanism which is fear. Compare with two other forms of mechanism friction and flooding, fear does not seem as a tool or mechanism. In my opinion fear is the impact of the censorship. When netizen access or discuss a sensitive issue on the internet, the government will give disincentive and the disincentive will create fear. It seems the mechanism itself is the punishment. Before discussing further about fear, I will quote some definition of fear, friction and flooding from Roberts book. Later I will demonstrate my arguments. “The first way that censorship operates—fear—affects the flow of information by deterring the media or individuals from distributing, analyzing, collecting, or consuming certain types of information” (Roberts 2018, 41–42).

My defense why fear is not considered as a mechanism, first I will start with the definition of fear. According to Webster, fear is

an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger; an instance of this emotion; a state marked by this emotion; anxious concern: Solicitude; profound reverence and awe especially toward God; reason for alarm: Danger (Merriam Webster Incorporated 2015).

Another definition from Cambridge fear is

an unpleasant emotion or thought that you have when you are frightened or worried by something dangerous, painful, or bad that is happening or might happen; to be frightened of something or someone unpleasant (Dictionary 2019).

And one more definition from Collin dictionary

Fear is the unpleasant feeling you have when you think that you are in danger; a feeling of distress, apprehension, or alarm caused by impending danger, pain, etc.; a cause of this feeling; awe; reverence; concern; anxiety; possibility; chance; to be afraid (to do something) or of (a person or thing); dread; to be sorry: used to lessen the effect of an unpleasant statement; to feel anxiety about something (Collin 2019).

My understanding about fear from the three resources, fear is a consequences or reaction or emotion on something will happen or already happen to someone, my objection is, it means fear is not action or activities. Mechanism refer to process or technique or operation or action. Roberts herself mentioned that fear- affects the flow of information by deterring. We can emphasize the word **affect** in her own definition. Therefore, by categorizing fear into one of the censorship mechanisms it means fear need to be action or activity.

Consider Roberts explanation on fear in “Censorship through fear is based fundamentally on the awareness of the punishment that can be expected if the collection, production, or consumption of particular types of information is carried out”(Roberts 2018, 44). From her explanation, the activities she refers in the mechanism is the punishment. Prior to this description, she mentioned

Censorship through fear functions by dissuasion—by prohibiting the expression of or access to information and articulating its punishment so that citizens are discouraged from doing so (Roberts 2018, 44)

The activity she implies in the sentences is the prohibiting of the expression and articulation of punishment. Which mean fear is a result of the prohibiting of the expression and articulation of punishment. Roberts described that censorship can influence the looking for information

Information-seeking behavior simply by inconveniencing them, without interfering so much to cause widespread public backlash. Small costs of access, not draconian punishments or sophisticated manipulation can have huge effects on the behavior of the majority (Roberts 2018, 13).

I want to elaborate Roberts argument on information seeking behavior and information need to furthermore propose that fear can stimulate curiosity and does not stop people in the information seeking behavior. Information need is the motivation for information seeking behavior. Based on Andretta description that

the information needs or 'knowledge void' starts the research process, determining the relevance and appropriateness of the information sought to the study of a particular field of knowledge, and the types of sources where this information can be found (Andretta 2012, 93).

In consequences, information need will generate people on their information seeking behavior. "The information seeking behavior is considered as human behavior to search for information in purposeful way to find the gap. This behavior is sometimes very undefinable" (Maamiry 2016). Nowadays information is basic of human needs. "...the right to information and universal access to information..." is consider as basic human right (Sen 2015, 2814).

According to Taylor, there were four levels in questioning information. The first level is the visceral need, is the actual but unexpressed need for information. The second level is the conscious need, the conscious, within brain description of the need. The third level is the formalized need, the formal statement of the need and last the compromised need, the question as presented to the information system (Taylor 1968, 182). Chinese people can be considered at the fourth level as they are questioning the information level. To back up my argument we can look at Daniela Stockmann research. She describes media credibility is important because it contains two thing expertise and trustworthiness.

Credibility means the news is unbiased, accurate, fair, to tell the whole story. Furthermore, Stockmann divided media into the official and non-official newspaper, the official paper representing the government's opinion while nonofficial paper close to ordinary people.

Even though the official paper considers as a government mouthpiece, people still want to read the news because they need the information, as Stockmann said less information better than no information at all (Stockmann 2013).

Moreover, the utility of information is the basis of information seeking in Stockmann argument. Individuals seek inconsistent information if (1) the source is believed to be of low quality can therefore easily to be refused, (2) inconsistent information believed to be useful in future (Stockmann 2013, 186). As we can see from Stockmann research Chinese people questioning the sources of information especially from the official media, but they rather read the official media foremost the news about the foreign affair as they believe it will be beneficial in the future. The other two censorship mechanisms constructed by Roberts were friction and flooding.

Friction, the second type of censorship, acts like a tax on information by directly increasing the costs of distribution of and access to information, diverting the media and individuals away from censored information. If information is simply more costly to collect, analyze, or distribute, even if there are no punitive costs of accessing or

distributing that information, individuals and the media will be less likely to come across it or distribute it (Roberts 2018, 42).

While “Flooding, the last type of censorship, vastly decreases the costs of particular information in order to increase the relative costs of competing information. Flooding can influence the media by presenting them with cheap, prepackaged, easy-to-publish information” (Roberts 2018, 43).

When Roberts illustrates how Chinese people decide jumping the great wall for a piece of information using VPN is a great example on how fear and friction affect people behavior on the internet, but it does not stop people in seeking the information. What is driving people from seeking information despite it can cause them into trouble and the cost is not cheap. Based on (Yang and Liu 2014) research netizen motivation in bypassing Chinese great wall are entertainment need, information seeking, and social need. Moreover, Jannica Heinström wrote a book entitled “From Fear to Flow” the book was published in 2010. Her main argumentation was “the interaction between personality and information behavior is thus one distinguished by predictability and consistency as well as variability and change” (Heinström 2010, 177). There are five personality traits analyse by Heinström, and every personality trait acts differently in term of the interaction with information. Shortly she describes it in the table.

**Table 1**  
**Heinström Overview of Mechanisms Trough Which the Five Factor-model Personality Traits Influence Information Interaction**

Personality Trait	Attidue	Goal	Strategy
Openness	Curious	Discovery	Flexible and Explorative Persistent
Conscientiousness	Determined	Accomplishment	and Goal - Oriented
Extrovesion	Energetic	Problem-solving	Spontaneous and Social
Agreeableness	Trusting	Harmony	Invitational and Reliant
Negative Affectivity	Worrying	Reassurance	Frenetic or Avoiding

Source: Heinström 2010, 177

By developing how individuals react to the internet interaction we can understand on how individuals respond on legal deterrence, intimidation, and reward as part of fear. Roberts explained in chapter four that specific targeted of fear are activist, public opinion leaders, journalist, the more influential people the more credibility threatening. The government does not target individual social media user, as they shielded by the masses. She also provided evidence on matched pair design in Weibo scope project.

A netizen who experienced censorship and have they post deleted forming two groups of information behavior, the first group is rebellion and the second group is self-censorship. We can explain these two reactions by Heinström information interaction. The individual belonging to rebellion group can be considered people with openness, conscientiousness, and extroversion personality traits. While the self-censorship group can be included in agreeableness and negative affectivity personality traits.

Further Heinström explained when individuals encounter with the possible menace it will trigger behavioral inhibition system or BIS. “The BIS is an inhibiting mechanism designed to protect the organism from misfortunes. It develops through fear, previous disappointments, and punishment, and works like an automatic brake function” (Heinström 2010, 80). Generally, all living things tend to be more reactive to negative stimuli compared

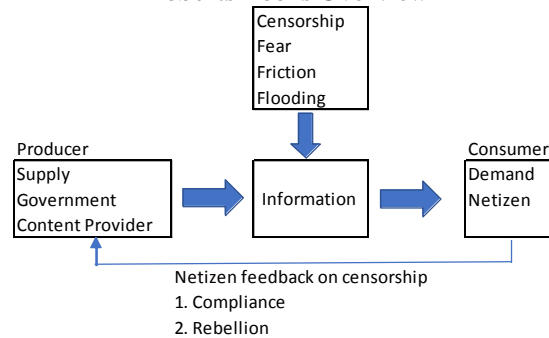
to positive or neutral stimuli as it is part of the survival mechanism. With fear, human will learn to process the source of anxiety and carefully react to the threat.

As different personality traits will react differently. People with openness trait when faced with a threat, they will most likely be seeking for more information to avoid the misfortunes. While people with negative affectivity most likely avoiding that kind of information seeking and possibly terminate the interaction. Dealing with openness people, fear might be not a good option of censorship. Flooding can be a better alternative in facing with openness individuals, it can influence reaction because netizen with openness trait will easily distract.

Distraction is a clever and useful strategy in information control in that an argument in almost any human discussion is rarely an effective way to put an end to an opposing argument. Letting an argument die, or changing the subject, usually works much better than picking an argument and getting someone’s back up (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017, 32).

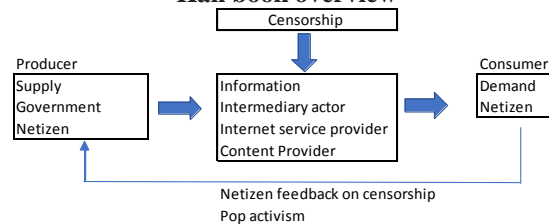
I will return to Roberts central argument that censorship violated the supply and demand law. In her research, Roberts treat government as the producer and netizen as the consumer. A different point of view delivered by Rongbin Han (Han 2018), whereas Han treat netizen as consumer as well as producer. The main actors in Roberts research are government and netizen, Han introduces intermediary actors which are the internet service and content provider. As comparison, I will illustrate the different approach between Roberts and Han discussion from my perspective. I do apologize if my illustration is an oversimplification of Roberts and Han complex books.

**Figure 1**  
**Roberts Books Overview**



From the illustration Roberts attempt to describe that censorship will influence the balance of the supply and demand, censorship placed in porous of the internet. As many porous were closed will cause a blockage. The blockage in the short period might not seem harmful, but in the long term, the blockage can cause serious damage like protest or demonstration from society in China. Now we can compare how Han perspective toward the censorship, although in Han book does not emphasize the censorship but people expression toward state control on the intermediary actor.

**Figure 2**  
**Han book overview**

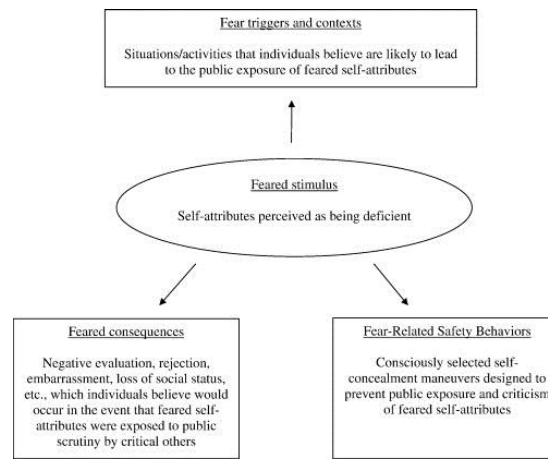


Han describes netizen as consumers and producers in chapter three “the Party-state and intermediary actors are not the only players in the struggle over control of online expression, however. After all, netizens are the ultimate targets of state censorship, both as consumers and producers” (Han 2018).

With netizen act as producer and consumer, we can expand our understanding of the information behavior. Despite netizen produce of content is a reaction against state control on the intermediary actor by placing netizen as a producer it can rebut Roberts argument on the blockage of supply and demand law because netizen can be served as abundance resources.

Fear related to negative emotion. People experienced fear when they are facing stimuli that triggered fear. Moscovitch illustrates a model of the fear stimulus and functionally in figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
**Moscovitch model of the feared stimulus and functionally related clinical sequelae in social anxiety**



Source: (Moscovitch 2009, 125)

Conversely, curiosity associated with a positive experience (Maner and Gerend 2007). Curiosity in information seeking behavior were often juxtapose with fear. Curiosity drive to filling the information gap by seeking information, while fear might withdraw people from find information in order to protect themselves. Information and communication technology can be tools to fulfill people curiosity for novel experience (Yu, Lin, and Liao 2017).

Chinese people behavior on information seeking can be driven by both fear and curiosity. Using fear, the authoritarian regime has created the uncertainty in the online media. The reaction might be positive and negative as mentioned by Mishel “reaction to uncertainty may also develop over time, so that a positive uncertainty may develop into fear if something unsettling is discovered, and negative uncertainty again may turn into hope when new information positively reframes the experience” (Heinstrom 2010, 154). By comparing fear and curiosity, we know that fear and curiosity is motivation behind the information seeking but with different preference. Since fear is part of information seeking motivation, I proposed that fear is not part of the censorship.

Interestingly, Roberts colleague Jennifer Pan (Pan 2016), wrote about the market dynamic in internet censorship in 2016. In the article, Pan has mentioned before Han that individuals can act as a broadcaster. In her paper, Pan described two types of censorship which are content removal and content blocking. The content blocking considered to be less effective than content blocking. Pan compare 96 countries on the censorship, she compared the reaction of the intermediary actor which is the social media provider and search engine.

Her primary argument is most authoritarian regimes cannot duplicate Chinese censorship because four reasons, first other authoritarian countries cannot import Chinese social media, second most of the authoritarian countries cannot create their own content



provider and foster the content provider. Third, other authoritarian countries cannot force the content provider to comply to the government like Chinese does and last, can other authoritarian countries decide to disconnect with the western (mostly United States) content provider like Google, Twitter, Yahoo.

Inline, with Pan discussion Ya-Wen Lei describe the CCP effort in controlling the Chinese market.

At the same time, CCP leaders' goal of developing the economy also required that they emphasize the law's role as an instrument to enable and advance the "commodity economy," later termed the "socialist market economy" by Deng Xiaoping. To enable this transition from a socialist planned economy to a socialist market economy, and to join the global market economy, the party- state enacted civil laws—the general part of private law—and economic laws to delineate properties, while also governing market transactions”(Lei 2018, 45–46).

Jennifer Pan shows that market is an important component in understanding information behavior. Chinese is the biggest internet market. Business competition among internet corporation is not the main highlight in Chinese digital discourse. The United States corporation like Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Youtube, Twitter knows to have dominated across many countries. Therefore, when pragmatist government like China meet the pragmatist local internet cooperation like Baidu and Weibo it is easy to make the local cooperation to comply with the government regulation.

It is a mutually beneficial exchange; China government provide the market and protect the market by blocking western company entering the China market. Meanwhile, the local company smoothly obey the regulation and operate the censorship. What happens in China internet market showing the weakness of the free market system. That the system is not necessarily beneficiary without government interference. This evidence contrastingly can challenge Roberts foundation supply and demand.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this part, I summarized the answer to my research question. First, the Chinese government can vague the communication process by censorship especially with friction and flooding. Chinese government effort to obstruct the information was illustrated like water flow. "It is like a water flow — if you block one direction, it flows to other directions, or overflows" (James 2009). However, information seeking drive by information need, and information is part of human basic need. Chinese people prefer to have less information rather than no information at all, nonetheless, the resource of information is not credible (Stockmann 2013). Regarding my second question can fear, friction and flooding stop people from being curious about information? The answer is no. Information leads to an answer and truth. As long Chinese people quest for the truth, any censorship mechanism cannot stop them on searching for information. This paper encounter Roberts ideas on fear as a form of censorship for two reasons. First fear is emotion it needs stimuli to appear. Compare with other two other mechanisms which are flooding and friction, fear does not seem as an activity. Second fear and curiosity have the same level in drive people for information seeking. Therefore, fear is the motivation behind the censorship mechanism, not as a mechanism itself. My suggestion, Roberts can consider using word threat instead of fear.

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