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Participatory Censorship With Illusory Empowerment: Algorithmic Folklore and Interpretive Labor beyond Fandom

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural complexities of participatory censorship among young Chinese netizens, particularly within and beyond fan communities, through a digital ethnographic lens. By examining the interplay between social media practices and state governance, the study introduces the concepts of algorithmic folklore and interpretive labor to elucidate how fans engage in censorship as both a routine task and a form of ideological negotiation. Through immersive participant observations and in-depth interviews with 25 informants involved in fan conflicts, the findings highlight that while fans perceive their participation in reporting as a form of empowerment, this engagement paradoxically reinforces state control and self-censorship. The study argues that the dynamics of fan conflicts are intricately linked to broader political contexts, where fans become both agents and subjects of censorship. Ultimately, this research underscores the cultural complexities of participatory censorship, revealing the ways it can obscure deeper systemic inequalities and exploitation within the framework of cultural governance in China.

Keywords

participatory censorship, algorithm folklore, interpretive labor, internet user, fandom

Introduction

With the dramatic expansion of China's media and entertainment industries in the post-WTO (World Trade Organization) era, the regulation of celebrities and stars has become an explicit policy and legal framework since 2005 (Cai, 2016; Xu & Yang, 2021), witnessed by booming official notices, policies, and laws (E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023), particularly targeting to regulate entertainment celebrities and related cultural products, as well as the increasing participatory censorship led by internet users (Luo & Li, 2022; Song, 2023; Y. Wang & Tan, 2023).

Participatory censorship is one of the core concepts for understanding the interaction between Chinese netizens and the state. This article focuses on exploring the cultural complexities of participatory censorship practices within the context of state internet governance through ethnographic research on young Chinese netizens, particularly idol fans. My research reveals that the participatory censorship practices of social media users are far more complex than the agency-driven activism proposed by Luo and Li (2022); rather, they involve a negotiation between social media users and state governance and surveillance.

This article provides an insider perspective on the concept of participatory censorship from within fan communities, offering a dual analysis of cultural complexity through immersive ethnographic observation:

On one hand, the concept of algorithmic folklore is introduced into the analysis of participatory censorship to explain how reporting has become a routine task for fans. Algorithmic folklore is the "beliefs and narratives [about social media algorithms] that are passed on informally and can exist in tension with official accounts" (Savolainen, 2022, p. 1092). This study finds that fans form hierarchical digital communities based on the functionalities and interfaces of social media, where more influential fans emerge as major figures. These major fans summarize widely circulated "reporting

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guidelines" to lead and mobilize collective reporting actions among fans. Reporting also serves as a crucial means for fans to distinguish friend from foe and to fragment into sub-communities. In addition, they generate ritualistic emotional resonance through performances and fabrications, thereby stimulating a spirit of struggle that encourages participation in collective reporting.

On the other hand, the concept of interpretive labor (Graeber, 2012) is employed to analyze the ideological construction underlying fans' deeper involvement in censorship. It explains how the fabrication and exaggeration of accusatory reports are internalized as legitimate practices by fans. In their appeals, reporting is framed as a form of empowerment by the state for citizens; in other words, fans perceive the legitimacy of reporting as a justification for violent collective actions, calling for broader collective reporting initiatives. Ironically, however, the interpretive labor contributed by fans also becomes a tool exploited by the state to maintain self-regulation among internet users and to monitor netizen discourse.

Thus, this study argues that social media users, represented by fan communities, remain a group that is both censored and utilized. Although they attempt to exercise agency for their own benefit through mobilizing collective participatory censorship actions, the stringent internet regulatory environment in China, the marginalized status of netizens under censorship, and the internalized ideological legitimacy of internet governance collectively determine that the Chinese netizens cannot truly be empowered within such a censorship regime.

This study examines how young internet users interpret and engage with censorship, blending digital ethnography on media platforms with in-depth interviews. During the period of digital ethnography, my informants were deeply engaged with the Boys' Love (BL) adapted drama *The Untamed*. BL is a genre that originated as Japanese manga in the 1970s and explores love, sex, and romance between boys and young men (Martin, 2012). Their involvement provided substantial firsthand material about their participation in a fan conflict known as *227 incident*, which is one of the most impactful internet conflicts that transcended fandom and entered the public sphere (E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023). This incident involved both fans and external non-fans utilizing the censorship system to retaliate against each other with accusations of illegal speech online. The conflict escalated into large-scale reporting activities, highlighting the broader practice of participatory censorship among internet users in China. In addition, to deepen the analysis, I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 informants both online and offline. These interviews provided insights into their experiences and perspectives on participatory censorship, particularly in the context of fan wars—where fans engage in conflicts on social media, launching attacks against each other. The role of "fan leaders"—individuals with a significant number of followers and considerable influence within the fan community—was also evident, as they often mobilize the collective reporting actions within fandom. Furthermore, anti-fans, who express their disdain for stars by spreading scandals and insults, contributed to the intensity of these conflicts.

Chinese Youth and internet Culture

The study of Chinese youth and internet culture provides key insights into the cultural participation and evolving values of China's young generation. Born in the post-reform era, these individuals are distinctly shaped by market-oriented economic shifts, rapid urbanization, and extensive exposure to global media (J. Yang, 2018). Characterized by high digital literacy, this generation navigates a unique blend of traditional Chinese values and modern influences through platforms like smartphones and social media (Fu, 2020; Lo & Zhang, 2006). This adeptness in digital environments enhances their political engagement and civic activism, enabling innovative forms of resistance and self-expression (Qi, 2010; Wan et al., 2016).

These young individuals also exhibit strong individualism and are driven by personal growth and career ambitions, reflecting a significant shift from the collectivist ethos of previous generations (Awokuse, 2007). My research on Chinese young internet users exemplifies how these groups are not only consumers but active cultural producers, influencing and reshaping the socio-political landscape. Through fan culture, we see a microcosm of broader generational changes, making this a vital area of study to understand the contemporary dynamics of youth culture in China (Fung, 2009). Given that my research specifically examines Chinese fans, who are a significant and representative subgroup of the young population, it positions fan communities as a vital lens through which to explore the complexities of cultural production, consumption, and political participation among contemporary young people in China. This focus allows for a deeper investigation into how these individuals shape and are shaped by the media landscapes they engage with, linking the nuances of fan culture directly to the broader themes of internet governance and civic legitimacy explored throughout this thesis.

So far, scholars have extensively examined the intersection of young people, politics, and ideology within the context of Chinese digital culture (e.g., Lin, 2015; Liu, 2019; Schneider, 2018). Song (2023) delves into China's ban on the popular Japanese video game *Animal Crossing*, investigating the politics of fun intersecting with censorship and nationalism and highlighting how gameplay becomes entangled with self-censorship and official ideology. Liao et al. (2022) explore how online fan communities in China have been mobilized toward nationalism and pro-government expressions, emphasizing the role of online fan groups in fostering fandom nationalism. The concept of counter-publics has been instrumental in analyzing fandom activism, particularly

within the context of BL-adapted dramas (Hu & Wang, 2021), such as Ng and Li (2020) who explore how female fans of BL dramas negotiate nationalist policies and gendered consumerist culture in China. Fung (2009) argues that fanaticism toward idols can lead Chinese people to violate the state's regulation and the Communist party and even request for accelerating social change. He also provides insights into the transformation of youth culture in China through fandom studies, showcasing the evolving dynamics of consumption patterns and cultural values (Fung, 2013). These studies collectively illustrate the complex relationship between fandom, politics, and ideology in contemporary China, shedding light on how fan communities navigate state-controlled digital environments and participate in nationalist discourses. However, I must point out that this existing scholarship mainly focuses on the agency of fan communities and the significance of mobilizing collective action as a form of resistance. My research may cast a shadow of disappointment over this optimistic discourse of fandom activism. Although fans attempt to use participatory censorship as a weapon in fan conflicts, the practice of collective reporting ultimately becomes a tool for the state to achieve internet surveillance and ideological internalization. By conducting digital ethnography, my study provides an interpretive perspective on the cultural complexities of participatory censorship from within fan communities.

This study re-considers the exploited reality of Chinese netizens' participatory censorship practices under the state by introducing the concepts of algorithmic folklore and interpretive labor from a cultural perspective. It questions the significance of resistance in participatory censorship practices and highlights how young internet users in China internalize and identify with the party-state's governance and censorship logic and how it shapes their understanding of the legitimacy of reporting. By focusing on the significant role of interpretive labor, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how participatory censorship is mobilized and maintained, extending its implications beyond fandom to broader societal and political contexts. This approach reveals the intricate ways in which cultural production, digital engagement, and state ideology intersect in the everyday practices of Chinese youth, offering new insights into the dynamics of internet governance and user agency.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory Censorship

The concept of "participatory censorship" has been used to unpack the role of social media users in maintaining authoritarian rule (e.g., Luo & Li, 2022; Song, 2023; E. N. Wang, 2022; Y. Wang & Tan, 2023). It becomes possible within the Chinese internet environment under three conditions: the uncertainty of censorship, the imaginary of censorship, and accusatory reporting (Luo & Li, 2022). They suggest that within a political climate of uncertainty, diverse perceptions of censorship emerge (Luo & Li, 2022, p. 1). Individuals rely on informal channels to gauge censorship due to the lack of clear guidelines. Instead, they draw upon past instances of state repression, information exchanged within insider circles, and even folklore or folk theory (Flinterud, 2023; Savolainen, 2022; Ye & Zhao, 2023) to anticipate censorship trends.

However, I have to clarify that the participatory nature of this censorship means that fans not only act as consumers of content but also as enforcers of normative behavior within their communities. They engage in accusatory reporting not merely as a means of self-protection but as a form of collective identity construction, where adherence to perceived censorship norms reinforces group cohesion. This dynamic complicates the notion of agency, as fans may believe they are exercising their power through participation when, in fact, they are often reinforcing the very structures of control they seek to navigate. Moreover, the interplay between user-generated algorithmic folklore and state narratives creates a feedback loop, where the actions of fans can inadvertently legitimize state surveillance mechanisms. As fans mobilize to report perceived violations, they contribute to a culture of self-regulation that aligns with the state's objectives, thereby blurring the lines between resistance and complicity. In this sense, participatory censorship becomes not just a tool of resistance but also a mechanism of social control, reflecting the intricate relationship between individual agency and systemic power within the Chinese internet ecosystem.

Algorithmic Folklore

Recent scholarly attention has been directed toward the cultural implications of platform algorithms for users. For example, the social chatbots powered by machine learning algorithms have transformed the intimate relationships of media users (B. Lin, 2024). In this study, I further enrich the cultural understanding of participatory censorship practices among young media users through the lens of algorithmic folklore (Savolainen, 2022). It refers to the myths, stories, and informal beliefs surrounding the functioning and effects of algorithms, particularly in social media platforms. These user-generated narratives often diverge from official explanations and significantly influence how digital communities understand and interact with these technologies. Savolainen (2022) discusses user narratives around "shadow banning" on social media, highlighting the gap between perceived and actual moderation practices and shedding light on broader issues of algorithmic transparency and governance (Savolainen, 2022). The most studies on algorithmic folklore in the context of censorship have primarily examined how media users leverage folklore to evade or subvert algorithmic surveillance, emphasizing the resistance aspect and agency of media user practices. However, this study offers an alternative interpretation of algorithmic surveillance, showing that although media users utilize algorithmic folklore to experience and perceive censorship within an authoritarian

context, their interpretive labor is still exploited by the party-state in turn to maintain the internet governance. The internet users utilize the censorship system and state internet surveillance to their advantage, punishing hateful online adversaries. However, the efforts invested in forming and circulating such folklore are closely tied to the daily interpretive labor of internet users. This labor, being almost unpaid and unnoticed, leads to the internalization of the party-state's censorship logic, significantly diminishing the agency and resistance of internet users, thus rendering them an exploited and controlled position. Therefore, this study introduces the concept of interpretive labor as a crucial development to complement the complexity of participatory censorship. It elucidates the contradictory situation where the agency of internet users is simultaneously exploited by the party-state to tighten the internet surveillance.

Interpretive Labor

To achieve the efficiency of participatory censorship and the severity of punishment, internet users engage in collective labor on a daily basis to understand and internalize the governing logic of censorship discourses. However, I must emphasize that the complexity of fans' participation in censorship practices also entails their exploitation and manipulation by the government. Indeed, when confronted with exploiters, a large part of the practice of fans is to reproduce, reconfigure, and internalize the power structures and value systems of the mainstream society. Therefore, I aim to incorporate the concept of interpretive labor (Graeber, 2012) to elucidate how internet users come to acknowledge and internalize the authorities' censorship logic within their participatory censorship practices. This entails their ongoing efforts to accommodate the principles of censorship as an ideology that informs their behaviors.

In his lecture *Dead Zones of the Imagination* (2012), Graeber developed the concept of interpretive labor to explain how the exploited weak understand and resonate with the exploiter's logic of domination. He argues that exploiters create human relationships based on structural violence, creating one-sided structures of the imagination in which the responsibility of doing the work of interpretation falls on the powerless and vulnerable. The exploited people understand and internalize the ruling logic by interpreting the governance of the exploiters, and even sympathize with them. The labor involved in interpreting the governance of the exploiters is defined as interpretive labor.

To deepen the understanding of the interplay between participatory censorship, algorithmic folklore, and interpretive labor in the context of Chinese digital governance, this study proposes three research questions to explore these dynamics:

> How do fans within Chinese social media communities interpret and navigate the complexities of participatory censorship in the context of state surveillance?
>
> In what ways does algorithmic folklore shape the perceptions and practices of collective reporting among social media users, and how does this impact their understanding of censorship legitimacy?
>
> What are the implications of participatory censorship for the agency of social media users in China, and how does this phenomenon reflect the interplay between individual resistance and state control?

Methods

My methodological approach of digital ethnography is derived from Miller's elucidation of digital anthropology (Miller, 2018), as well as Wang and Liu's specific interpretation of digital ethnography research methods (D. Wang & Liu, 2021), namely that digital ethnography is fundamentally "long-term, immersive participant observation," rather than simply collecting internet content from an outsider's perspective (Miller, 2018, p. 10). My analysis is based on a 12-month digital ethnography on the internet collective reporting among audiences of the BL-adapted drama *The Untamed* and normal netizens (from December 2020 to January 2022) along with in-depth interviews with 25 anonymized informants, who suffered and/or engaged with reporting activities.

Digital Ethnography

My digital ethnographic inquiry primarily centers around Weibo and WeChat, the preeminent social media platforms among Chinese fans. I observed the Weibo posts, discussions, and daily tasks of my fan informants, all with their informed consent. In addition to the general observation and analysis of information on Weibo, another important part of my digital ethnography is the long-term, more detailed, and intensive observation of the activities of my informants online, collected with their consent. I not only maintained continuous observation of their posts and discussions within the fan community on Weibo but also took part in their WeChat groups' daily discussions. Also, WeChat is a very important platform for my online in-depth interview with some fan informants who may not be able to meet me in person during the pandemic.

Since joining the fans community and participating in daily fan tasks, my involvement in fan practices has mainly included the following:

- Participating in various online and offline activities organized by fan clubs, meeting with club organizers and fan leaders;
- Observing and participating in fans reporting practice on Weibo and WeChat, discussing with my fan informants to record their attitudes to the reporting;
- Completing the daily fan tasks specified within the community. During my 12-month digital ethnography, a large part of my time was spent engaging in daily fan practices and recording them at all times.

Informants and In-Depth Interview

My digital ethnographic inquiry primarily centers around Weibo and WeChat, the main social media platforms among Chinese media users groups. Apart from digital ethnography, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 25 informants (see *Appendix*). My fieldwork included specific case studies, analyzing insights from social media accounts, WeChat group discussions, offline fan events, and face-to-face or video interviews with these informants. I maintained long-term connections with them, regularly engaging in conversations to track their evolving thoughts and experiences.

These 25 informants provided invaluable firsthand insights, crucial for the success of my fieldwork. During the 12 months of my digital ethnography, I followed five hashtags: *#Xiao Zhan*, *#The Untamed*, *#227 Incident*, *#Bojun Yixiao*, and *#I am ordinary person and I hate Xiao Zhan.* These hashtags are related to netizens involved in the reporting actions, providing a comprehensive perspective to examine both sides of the conflict. Due to the sensitive nature of fan identities, these observations are presented anonymously and in paraphrased form as evidence in the discussions.

Reporting System and Guidebooks on Social Media

In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced increasingly stringent cultural policies to regulate fan culture and communities on various online platforms. By internalizing the censorship sensibility backed by the state as a conduit for legitimacy for fan practices, some fans use state power to censor the comments and works of other social media users, a practice known in China as "reporting" (举报). This practice is underpinned by a ubiquitous reporting mechanism on the social media platform, which provide different categories of reasons for reporting on the interface of its reporting section (E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023). Each category contains a number of more detailed sub-categories and a blank input field for writing a specific reason for reporting. It is believed by fans that the different reasons chosen will determine the priority of the reported case, with those with "more serious" reasons being prioritized and receiving more severe punishment.

Reporting Mechanism and Imaginaries of Censorship

Fans reporting behavior is related to the party-state censorship and surveillance operating on social media platforms. Taking Weibo, one of the most popular social media outlets for Chinese fans, as an example. Each account of Weibo is registered by real name and linked to the real-world identity of its owner. Weibo has a reporting function for every comment and user's page, which welcomes any user to report to the platform's administrators any comments or users they consider "illegal." Such a feature also includes a list of reasons for reporting what the user considers to be "illegal" speech, divided into 11 basic categories and specific reasons. As shown in the Picture 1, specific reasons under "harmful information" are cults, insulting martyrs, terrorism, historical nihilism, religious and ethnic issues, animal cruelty, other harmful information, and so on.

However, even though social media users have a clear interface and categories to report "illegal" content, the fact remains that the exact level of "illegality" that will be blocked is always a vague concept (Y. Wang & Tan, 2023). The rules of such censorship can only be tested through the practice of fans reporting day in and day out. This has led to the internalization of participatory censorship within the fan community. The concept of "participatory censorship" (Luo & Li, 2022) has been used to unpack the role of social media users in maintaining authoritarian rule. Luo and Li find "a political environment of uncertainty fostered divergent imaginaries about censorship" (2022, p. 1). Social actors rely on informal sources to estimate censorship because they do not know for sure what will be censored. Instead, people rely on political signals released by prior instances of state repressions, information circulated in insiders' networks, or even hearsay or folklore stories to estimate censorship.

Reporting Guidebooks

The knowledge sharing within the community can also be an effective way for members to make use of censorship to defend their interests. Different fan communities deal with fan wars by strategically borrowing the language and practices of the authorities to discipline and punish those fan enemies. That is, fans have made use of this participatory censorship as a weapon to win the fan war.

Reporting as a fan practice has developed within fan communities as a strategy to cope with and, furthermore, make use of the party-state's platform governance and censorship. When individual fans engage in fan conflict, to punish rival fans by getting their accounts blocked or even punished by the authorities, fans often pool their individual experiences to come up with a set of "reporting guidebook."

The reporting tactics included in the "guidebook" are considered "effective" tested through their own daily practice, which is a way for fans to test the boundaries and scales of censorship. These efficient tactics are compiled into the "guidebook" that circulates within the fan community to guide each individual fan in their collective reporting actions to win the fan war. This "guidebook" is often distributed by lead fans with a large voice and more followers online and includes examples of reporting reasons summarized in detailed entries. For example, my informant mentioned:

> You accuse an enemy of "an anti-communist stance," which may be dealt with more efficiently by platform administrators than if you accuse your enemy of "obscene pornography" (Hailey, in-person interview, Suzhou, May 2021).

Picture 1. The interface of reporting on Weibo (as of 23 November 2022).

It may also result in the enemy receiving harsher penalties from both platform and the internet police, like the deletion of their social media account, or even trouble in real life for the account owner. With the brutal aim of "killing" the enemies online and offline, the guidebook contains many such comparisons, thus teaching fans to find the "more serious" accusation when engaging in fan conflicts and reporting rival fans to platform administrators, to "kill" them in one blow. During my digital ethnographic observation within the fan communities, I gained access to some "reporting guidebooks" circulated in the fan community, as shown in the Picture 2:

This kind of accusatory reporting is considered to be one of the key features of participatory censorship. Other characteristics of participatory censorship include participants being in non-professional and non-politically mobilized online community, such as the fans super topics on Weibo discussing the idols; peer-based surveillance; content moderation; and accusatory reporting (Luo & Li, 2022). First, even for the same category of reason, there are different templates, leading to more segmented and differentiated content of report. For example, under the same category of "malicious marketing," different content will highlight different kinds of negative impact. The selection of a suitable reason template is often the result of thoughtful analysis by fan leaders. Second, as I have highlighted in the translation, these reporting templates tend to describe the negative impact as very serious, qualifying it with words such as "seriously" and "extremely"—even though sometimes this description is overstated for the purpose of reporting. Third, these templates tend to emphasize the harmful influence on underage netizens, adding a further layer of seriousness to the allegations. Finally, and most interestingly, all the templates emphasize that the message in question violates Weibo's rules and that this is during the government's "Sweep-up Campaign," urging Weibo administrators to deal with the reported message as soon as possible.

In my observation, this guidebook was reposted over 1,000 times, with the fan leaders adding the comment "*Save this, you'll need it*." Thus, how are these reporting guidelines effectively disseminated within fan communities? In what ways do the practices of collective reporting profoundly influence the delineation of friend and foe among fans, as well as the formation of sub-communities? How does the advantage held by major fans incite others to participate in collective reporting? These nuanced internal dynamics of power structures are derived from my participatory observation within fan communities, providing essential and profound cultural complexities to the practices of participatory censorship. Therefore, the next section will focus on analyzing how the hierarchical

Picture 2. One of the reporting guidebooks, posted by a fan leader and circulated in an idol's fan community on Weibo with my emphases (captured on Weibo, 23 December 2022).

nature of fan communities and fans' daily tasks mobilize collective reporting efforts.

Participatory Censorship in Hierarchical Fan Communities

To address these questions, this article will examine the case of the "227 incident," which represents the largest fan conflict in Chinese fandom in 2020. This case exemplifies how the dynamics of power, collective identity, and the influence of fan leaders converge to shape the participatory censorship landscape. This article aims to uncover the mechanisms through which reporting practices are enacted, the implications for fan community cohesion, and the broader ramifications for state control in the realm of social media.

Fans' Daily Tasks and Fan Leaders' Mobilization

During my digital ethnography, some informants were avid fans of the BL-adapted drama *The Untamed*. They provided valuable firsthand insights into fan-war participation, including the "227 incident." This incident occurred within the fandom of *The Untamed* (陈情令, *Chen Qing Ling*, Tencent TV, 2019), a popular Chinese BL-adapted drama that gained

Figure 3. The rules launched by the administrator of Xiao's super topic to regulate fan members. (captured on 09 September 2024).

immense popularity (E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023). The 227 incident stemmed from a conflict between two fan subcommunities: "only-fans" (who support one star) and "CP-fans" (who enjoy fantasized romances between stars). The activities of only-fans and CP-fans differ significantly, leading to distinct images of idols based on their specific preferences, since the public image of a star is a text open to interpretation by fans (Dyer, 1990). Only-fans typically portray their idols as glamorous figures and often view them as family or partners, fostering intimate imaginary relationships. This is evident in the affectionate terms used by fans, particularly among female fans of male idols. Conversely, CP-fans create romantic narratives involving male idol couples, which contradicts mainstream heteronormative values. To maintain boundaries and avoid public scrutiny, fan communities adhere to the rule of "enjoying oneself in your own circle" (E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023) and restrict the use of idol's full names to only-fans on social media. This results in CP-fans operating in their own territories, primarily on platforms like *Lofter.com* and *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, while only-fans claim the public space on sites like Weibo. Tensions arise when these boundaries are crossed, leading to fan conflicts.

Mobilizing collective reporting is a daily task assigned by fan leaders to members of the fan community, serving as an important standard by which fans demonstrate their loyalty and contributions. These daily tasks are typically established and disseminated by fan leaders on super topic platforms (Yin, 2020). The *super topic platform (超级话题平台)* is a specialized feature provided by Weibo, offering designated pages for specific user groups to share information and engage in discussions. The daily digital practices of idol fans heavily revolve around this super topic platform, profoundly influenced by its functionalities and user interface. Taking Xiao's super topic platform as an illustration (Figure 3), it includes a dedicated bulletin area where the management group can post rules and policies governing the platform, such as guidelines for new fans and community management policies.

The administrators of the super topic platform are always fan leaders and also have different roles, each responsible for distributing various aspects of fans' daily tasks. For example, on Xiao's super topic, there are nine groups taking charge of different tasks (Figure 4).

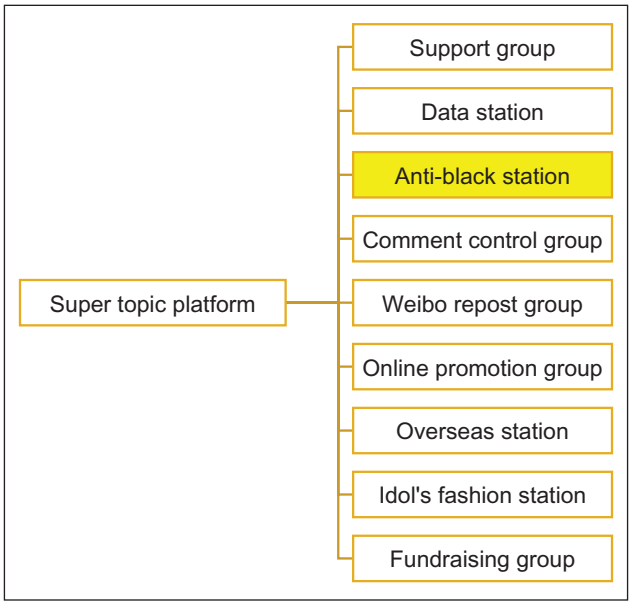


Figure 4. Divisions of labor in a super topic platform.

Among these roles, the "anti-black" station (反黑站) is responsible for collecting scandals and insults directed at idols and compiling them into reporting guidelines to be disseminated to fan members (Figure 5). This mobilizes everyone to participate in collective reporting actions with the aim of having the reported content and users banned from the Weibo platform.

Participating in and carrying out collective reporting activities becomes a way for individual fans' identification with the fan community, and reporting becomes a daily task that fans have to carry out, an obligation for fans who want to integrate into the community. One of the criteria for checking a fan's loyalty is to see if they have a "punch-in" for "anti-black" missions:

> "Anti-black" becomes our daily task. Every day, the anti-black station posts a reporting task on its Weibo account, with links to the posts that need to be reported and the reporting guidebook telling us which reason to choose. [After completing the task], **we leave comments under this post to declare that I have completed the task. It is "punch-in"** (打卡) (Silvia, video interview, WeChat, 27 March 2021).

The fans who are involved in fan disputes where their loyalty is questioned often post screenshots of these "punch-ins" to prove their innocence. Thus, the act of reporting is internalized and becomes a ritualistic performance for the sake of establishing the legitimacy of fan identities. The participating fans often do not verify whether the subject of the

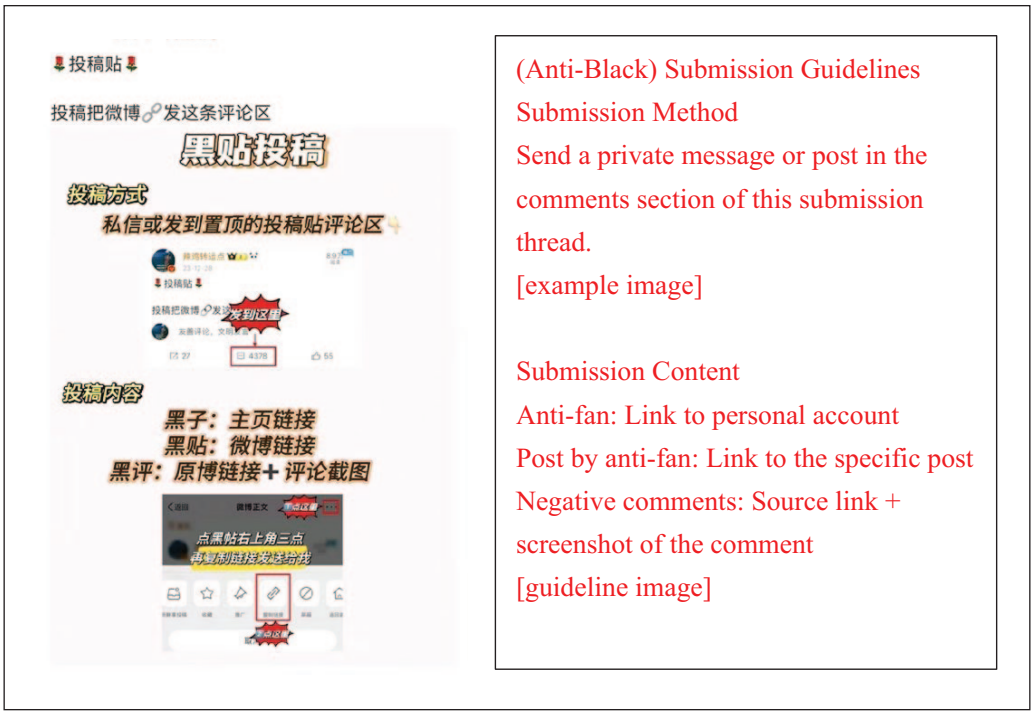


Figure 5. The guideline for collecting negative posts about their idol, posted by a major fan in charge of "anti-black" tasks (captured on 9 September 2024).

Picture 6. "Reporting guidelines" by Xiao's only-fan posted on 26 February 2020 (captured on 29 February 2020).

report is actually "illegal," but they rather perform reporting as their daily tasks. In a way, this reduces the guilt of whistleblowing and makes it a legitimized activity to engage in as a matter of course.

Internalized Accusatory Reporting With Civic Legitimacy

In February 2020, a CP-fan author published an erotic fanfiction titled "*Falling*" on Weibo, Lofter, and Archive of Our Own (AO3). The story, featuring Xiao Zhan as a transgender prostitute and Wang Yibo as a high-school student, sparked controversy. Xiao's only-fans were dissatisfied and began collectively reporting the fiction to Weibo, Lofter, and to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), citing its explicit content as harmful to juveniles (Picture 6).

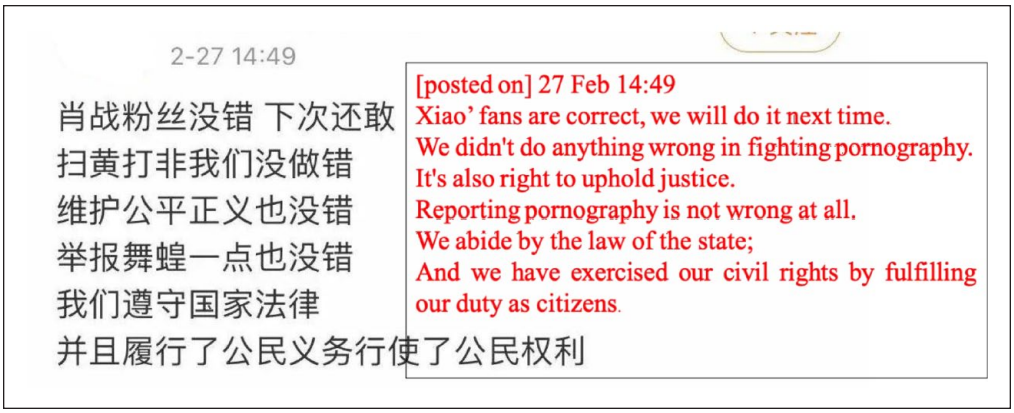
My informant Hailey, who is an only-fan of Xiao, recalled her motivation for participating in this collective reporting action at the time and her personal understanding of censorship to me in our subsequent in-person interview in May 2021:

> I also think we are innocent, the distribution of obscene pornographic fiction is already illegal. There are so many juveniles in fandom that these things can have negative impact on them.
>
> It's true, I admit we exaggerated some of the negative effects in order to get the author banned, but it is also because of the pornographic novel causing bad impact to the underage. **With such accusations, our reported cases are dealt with more quickly, the more people report them, the faster they are dealt with.** You see, it only took 3 days for AO3 to be walled [means blocked by the Great Wall established by Chinese government banning some international websites].
>
> It's a good thing that AO3 was banned by the state, as this international site with its dangerous elements should not be accessible to the underage in the first place.
>
> The **state encourages** this kind of reporting and we are just using the power that the state has given us **in a legitimate way** (Hailey, in-person interview, Suzhou, May 2021. Highlighted by myself).

In our interview, Hailey stressed more than once that this kind of reporting was justified and encouraged by the state, as I observed in the comments posted by Xiao's fans on Weibo (Picture 7).

This assertion of the legitimacy of reporting on the one hand reduces the guilt of participating in whistleblowing, and on the other, it becomes an effective "accusatory reporting" (Luo & Li, 2022) to mobilize a broader collective reporting action. Fans attempt to achieve "content moderation" (Y. Wang & Tan, 2023) on social media through "peer-based surveillance" (Luo & Li, 2022). However, it is also important to note that this participatory censorship is not genuinely motivated by fans' claims of "upholding justice" or "fulfilling their civic duty"; but rather it is motivated by their wish to punish their enemies through strategically replicating these political accusations. As Hailey highlighted in the interview, the core purpose of fan reports is to make the person being reported on get punished as quickly as possible, so they exaggerate the accusations in order to ensure that "reported cases are dealt with more quickly, the more people report them, the faster they are dealt with."

At this point, it seems that reporting has truly become a "powerful weapon" that fans can leverage for their own benefit (as other scholars have argued regarding participatory censorship). However, the story does not end there; it takes a turn



Picture 7. A Xiao's fan posted on Weibo stating their reporting was justified by the state (Captured by 29 February 2020).

toward a direction that is increasingly uncontrollable for the fans. What appears to be an empowered act of reporting ultimately becomes a tool exploited by the state to strengthen internet surveillance. This is also the reason why I introduce the concept of interpretive labor into the analysis of participatory censorship.

Illusory Empowerment, Real Exploitation—The Internalization of Reporting and Interpretive Labor Beyond Fandom

Such collective reporting by Xiao's fans quickly received feedback from the platforms and the authorities. Subsequently, all the works of the author on Weibo and Lofter were deleted; a large quantity of works on Lofter concerning any pornography-related elements (even from other fandom) was also removed by Lofter's censorship system; and the Chinese government then banned AO3 entirely (Picture 8). The author of *Xiazhui* had to delete her posts and close the Weibo account; as of May 2022, her name cannot be found on Weibo.

However, for Chinese fans from other fandoms, AO3 and Lofter are regarded as their crucial territories. Thus, a far wider constituency of participants from other fandoms were furious with Xiao's fans. On 27 February 2020, these angry fans struck back at Xiao's fans online with the hashtag *#227 Union* to boycott Xiao's commercial endorsements and other works and to punish Xiao himself (Picture 9).

As AO3 was blocked by the government, fans from other circles expressed their frustration. These fans, despite being devoted to different idols or media, had no original interest in Xiao. They neither loved nor hated him and did not consider themselves part of his fan community. Instead, they defined themselves as "non-fans." They blamed the loss of the creative media platform on the reporting actions taken by fans from other fandoms against Xiao and his supporters. The non-fans elevated their conflicts with Xiao's fan community to the level of defending the "freedom of cultural creation," thus legitimizing their boycott with widespread solidarity. As my informants said in our interviews:

> Xiao's fans have set a very bad start by blocking the whole platform with the exaggerated accusation reporting if they are not satisfied with any fan fiction. Once such reporting is successful, more fans will copy this method in the future (Flora, video interview by WeChat, 10 January 2021).

> This kind of blindly collective reporting is horrible. Xiao did not restrain his fans at all, so he had to pay for it too. Since they had the collective power to get our AO3 banned, let's give him a taste of the collective power too [refers to the collective boycott of Xiao Zhan by the same means] (Meg, in-person interview, Hengdian, 26 July 2021).

Interestingly, my informant Flora mentioned that when she was involved in the conflict against Xiao's fans, a non-fan made a comment on Weibo that she strongly agreed with:

> She said that "**reporting is about giving citizens the right** to social oversight, about giving them the opportunity to **express themselves upwards** in areas where the relevant laws are not perfect, not about giving fans the power to be **partisan and purge themselves of dissent.**" I think that's a good point, so it's time for those poor fans who are blindly controlled to wake up. **The only way to make them wake up is to punish their idols**, otherwise they won't re-consider what they have done. (Flora, video interview by WeChat, 10 January 2021).

That is, both Xiao's fans and the non-fan netizens are sharing the common consciousness that reporting is an inherent right of citizens, serving as a fundamental requirement for the legitimacy of all reporting activities. This underlying logic stems from an assimilation of the state governance, which has been internalized as a commonly accepted code of behavior. These anti-fans and non-fans even took the same approach as that of Xiao's only-fans in the "227 incident": they summarized the "reporting guidebook" on Weibo to appeal Xiao's anti-fans and non-fans to report Xiao and his fans as they

Picture 8. AO3's Weibo account posted a message on 29 February 2021 stating that the site was no longer available to Chinese users.

Picture 9. In the comment section of the Weibo account of Estee Lauder, a brand endorsed by Xiao, the netizens commented with the hashtags of #227Union, #XiaoFansReportingAO3.

claim they are causing pervasive adverse influences on the underaged in China. As my informant Meg mentioned, "*let's give him a taste of the collective power too!*" (in-person interview, Hengdian, 26 July 2021). Most of these posts will carry the hashtag *#I'm an ordinary person, I hate Xiao Zhan*, so if any Weibo user clicks on this tag, it will take them to a summary page about all the accusations against Xiao and his fans.

By creating shared use of the hashtag, these anti-fan and non-fan subcommunities also achieved inter-community discussion and interaction. On the one hand, they were victims of fan conflicts and reporting, holding the banner of "defending the freedom of creation" against the abuse by fandom police, as my informant Rose said in our interview:

> I really hate them [referring to Xiao's fans]. I follow a lot of foreign fanfic authors on AO3, and even my fan friends and I met each other because we shared fictions on AO3. Now we have nothing left, and there is even less freedom for fan creation (Rose, in-person interview, Shanghai, 29 June 2021).

On the other hand, however, they have not managed to make a complete break with the acts they hate, and they continue to make use of similar or even the same tactics, utilizing censorship and state power to report on Xiao and his fans. According to my informant Meg, a non-fan leader on the online community, she commented on Weibo with their hashtag:

> *#I'm an ordinary person, I hate Xiao Zhan#* I actually didn't want to do it, but I had no other choice. Reporting is the only effective way to punish him and his idiot fans. (Meg, comment on Weibo, as of 30 Feb 2020)

In the Chinese context, non-fans assert their status to establish the legitimacy of their views within the mainstream. Fan culture is often marginalized, and by distancing themselves from it, non-fans express disdain for fans' everyday practices, especially their reporting activities. This contempt reflects the antagonistic attitudes present in fan conflicts. Non-fans often moralize and justify their position, while also adopting the reporting logic favored by those in power over censorship.

In this environment, civil rights rhetoric is co-opted to justify accusatory reporting. The invocation of ideals such as justice and accountability serves as a veneer for actions that, in practice, reinforce existing power structures. This paradox is evident in how fans frame their reporting as a form of civic engagement or a duty to uphold community standards, while simultaneously participating in a system that often marginalizes dissenting voices. As Luo and Li (2022) note, this creates a dynamic where accusations are not merely expressions of discontent but are framed as necessary actions to maintain order within the community.

Moreover, the rhetoric of civil rights becomes a tool for non-fans to assert their moral superiority. By emphasizing their role as vigilant watchdogs, they position themselves as defenders of social norms against what they perceive as the chaos of fan culture. This mirrors broader societal tendencies in China, where state narratives often invoke civil rights rhetoric to suppress dissent while simultaneously promoting social harmony (Dutton, 2008). In this way, accusatory reporting is not just a form of participatory censorship; it is also a mechanism through which individuals negotiate their identities and assert their legitimacy within a hierarchical social structure.

Thus, the legitimization of accusatory reporting through civil rights discourse reflects a complex interplay of power, identity, and ideology. Fans and non-fans alike navigate this landscape, often reproducing the very inequities they seek to challenge. As such, the practice of reporting transforms into a battleground for asserting control and influence, further entrenching the dynamics of surveillance and self-censorship within digital spaces. Ultimately, this highlights the subtitle of *Illusory Empowerment, Real Exploitation*, where the supposed empowerment derived from participation in reporting conceals deeper systemic inequalities and exploitation.

Conclusion: The Cultural Implications of Participatory Censorship

Thus, this case analysis provides nuanced cultural complexities of participatory censorship (Luo & Li, 2022) among young internet users in China, introducing the concepts of algorithmic folklore (Savolainen, 2022) and interpretive labor (Graeber, 2012). These concepts illustrate the negotiated positions of internet users in their interactions with party-state internet surveillance and media governance. On one hand, users summarize "useful" reporting guidelines based on the algorithmic folklore they accumulate through everyday practices. On the other hand, they devote significant interpretive labor to these activities, which the party-state exploits to internalize censorship logic and legitimacy among internet users, ultimately tightening internet governance through self-censorship.

These fan wars can lead to business turmoil, such as boycotts of endorsements, and prompt media platforms to respond quickly by banning hashtags and enforcing self-censorship. More importantly, fan wars are closely linked to state governance, imbuing cultural activities with political significance. In the media platform environment, where the reporting mechanism is ubiquitous, fans must engage in daily practices, spending considerable time and energy to try out reporting rules repeatedly. They draw up guidelines for effective reporting experiences and internalize the logic of reporting-censorship as a daily task. Thus, from the inception of their fanhood, fans assimilate into the state's censorship mechanisms and may even use this mechanism for revenge in fan wars. In this platform-state-fan interaction, both platforms and fans are more passive and vulnerable than the state, with fans being the most vulnerable.

Some fan scholars view the interaction between internet users and the governance as the "art of being governed" or what Scott (1985) termed "the weapons of the weak"—"cautious resistance and calculated conformity" (L. Yang & Xu, 2016). This perspective highlights the subjectivity and agency of internet users, suggesting they possess some power to negotiate with state authority (e.g., Ng & Li, 2020; Zheng, 2016). These ideas emerged in a context of optimistic global economic development and less-stringent party-state governance of cultural production and media platforms.

However, my research during the pandemic offers a more critical interpretation. It became evident that the state was tightening its regulation of the cultural industry and increasing surveillance of media users' content production. In this context, the notion of "the art of being governed" may understate the suffering of individual fans. Instead, interpretive labor

better captures fan practices, particularly their additional efforts in creating and circulating the "reporting guidebook." This interpretive labor involves fans internalizing and embodying the ideology and behavioral logic of the state, leading to increased marginalization and vulnerability for fan culture.

Ultimately, the interplay between fans, platforms, and the state illustrates a profound irony: what may seem like illusory empowerment through participatory censorship can mask real exploitation and reinforce existing power hierarchies. This dynamic underscores the urgent need to critically examine the implications of participatory censorship within the broader context of cultural governance and individual agency.

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Note

1. To ensure the confidentiality of Yumi's case, I have omitted the specific details regarding the time of our meeting in Y city.

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Appendix

Informants Information.

	Anon. ID	Birth year	Sex	First acquaintance	First chat/interview	In-person meeting	Frequency of information updates
01	Abby	1998	F	Weibo	27 December 2020, Fans gathering, Tianjin	Guangzhou, Suzhou, Tianjin	March, May 2021
02	Bella	2000	F	Abby's friend	12 November 2021, Video recording	No	No
03	Celia	1996	F	Concert in Guangzhou	27 December 2020, Fans gathering and in-person interview, Guangzhou	Guangzhou, Suzhou	May 2021
04	Dora	1999	F	Abby's friend	4 May 2021, Fan gathering, Suzhou	Suzhou, Shanghai	June, August 2021
05	Elly	1997	F	Weibo	4 May 2021, Casual dialogue before concert, Suzhou	Suzhou	September 2021
06	Flora	1995	F	Weibo	10 January 2021, Video interview on WeChat	Hengdian	September 2021
07	Gill	1995	F	Concert in Guangzhou	13 May 2021, In-person interview, Suzhou	Changsha	March 2021
08	Hailey	1997	F	Weibo	4 May 2021, In-person interview, Suzhou	Suzhou, Changsha	September 2021
09	Iris	1992	F	Weibo	13 December 2020, Fans gathering, Tianjin	Beijing, Tianjin, Suzhou	December 2020, September 2021
10	Jenny	1997	F	Iris's friend	12 June 2021 Video interview on WeChat	No	August 2021
11	Karen	1998	F	Elly's friend	23 July 2021 Video interview on WeChat	No	March 2021
12	Lily	2000	F	Flora's friend	20 December 2020, Fans gathering, Beijing	Beijing, Shanghai	July, September 2021

(Continued)

Appendix. (Continued)

	Anon. ID	Birth year	Sex	First acquaintance	First chat/interview	In-person meeting	Frequency of information updates
13	Meg	2000	F	Weibo	20 August 2020, Telephone interview	Tianjin, Hengdian	July, August 2021
14	Nina	1996	F	Meg's friend	12 June 2021, Video interview on WeChat	Shanghai, Hengdian	September 2021
15	Ole	1997	F	Iris's friend	13 September 2021 Telephone interview	Suzhou	September 2021
16	Penny	1995	F	Weibo	20 December 2020, Fans gathering, Beijing	No	October 2021
17	Quella	1991	F	Celia's friend	20 December 2020, Fans gathering, Beijing	Guangzhou	December 2020
18	Rose	1985	F	Weibo	29 June 2021, In-person interview, Shanghai	Shanghai	October, November 2021
19	Silvia	1980	F	Rose's friend	27 March 2021 Telephone interview	No	July 2021
20	Tina	1983	F	WeChat group A	15 March 2021 WeChat group chat	Changsha	October 2021
21	Vera	1993	F	Rose's friend	15 March 2021 WeChat group chat	No	March 2021
22	Wendy	2001	F	Concert in Tianjin	21 July 2021 Video interview on WeChat	Changsha, Guangzhou	September, October 2021
23	Yumi	1985	F	WeChat group A	X month,[1] In-person interview	Y City	X month
24	Zoe	1994	F	Weibo	23 April 2021 WeChat video interview	No	17 November 2021
25	Xenia	1992	F	Weibo	8 September 2021, Fan gathering (Hengdian)	Hengdian	15 September 2021