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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Journalism versus national security: An analysis of reportage by journalists in Kenya defense forces activities during “operation Linda Nchi” (2011-2012)**

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**This study sought to investigate the complex relationship between journalistic activities and national security. The study answered the following questions: At what point should reporters put aside their professional and career interests for the sake of national security? Should press limits be self-imposed? What obligations do journalists have when it obtains information with national security implication? The study used content analysis to measure these thematic areas. The analysis used 18 newspapers drawn randomly from publications by The Daily Nation and the standard newspapers in Kenya between October 2011 and February 2012. It searched for narratives that undermined government efforts to safe guard national security, caused fear among citizens and undermined the Kenya Defense forces efforts in fighting the Al-Shabaab. The study found out that 64% of the articles exposed government moves geared towards protecting Kenya’s national security, 37% caused fear among citizens by exposing the attacks to Al-Shabbab hence retaliation was eminent and 81% did not care about secrecy of information as they exposed crucial information from the government that could endanger Kenya’s national security. The study concluded that journalist should be trained on ethical reporting and guided on how their coverage can either salvage a national security crisis or make it worse.**

**Key words:** Media, Journalism, National security.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Journalists and their media outlets exist to publish stories. The constitution of Kenya offers press freedom and the government has been battling court cases to try and curtail this freedom especially on matters that touch on national security. According to Lowenthal (2017), freedom to publish is not the same as “the people’s right to know”, which usually complicates the aspect of journalists’ right to publish stories on matters concerning

national security. National Security, in the current description of a Nation - State, refers to the effective management of national affairs of a country at all levels of its operation that aims to maintain the integrity of the nation and the security of its people (Abel, 2006). In the present-day age though, national security has diverged from national defense, and has widened to incorporate different facets of a globalized world, in terms of

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economic, human, cultural, and political security. Although still greatly influenced and defined by the government, national security has nowadays entered the public domain and has been framed by most experts as ‘the creation of conditions that contribute to the nation’s economic, social, and political matters that safeguard territorial integrity of a state, which sustains these conditions, ensure freedom of choices and capabilities to survive in a volatile security environment’ (Cohen-Almagor, 2001).

In Kenya, the strength of its democracy and the best way to pursue and maintain its national interests is through freedom of expression and access to information, which allows citizens to make responsible decisions especially when choosing leaders. Kenya’s media industry is quite vibrant. The industry is dominated by six main media groups that control approximately 95% of the audience. They include; the Nation Media Group (NMG); Royal Media Services (RMS); the Standard Group, Mediamax, Radio Africa Group and the national broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (Yusha’u 2018).

According to Abel (2006), Dworzniak (2016), Kampf (2014), and Livingston (2019), freedom of expression and press freedom also allows the media to inform the public about government activities, promote accountability by government officials, as well as provides solutions to conflict. This encourages various views including dissent voices to be heard. Journalists and media houses therefore, play the role of fourth estate which holds the government accountable in all its activities. However, what obligations do journalists have when it obtains information of national security concerns? Cohen-Amalgor (2001) indicates that, a terrorist attack in the nineteenth century in Nigeria would have become known to people elsewhere around the world only after a few days. This has drastically changed in the current century. The evolution of mass communication and the power of journalistic activities have changed the whole trajectory of events. In the past, journalists have come across information with national security concerns and have agreed not to publish for the sake of national security (Lowenthal, 2017). Good examples include the Cuban exile training camps in Florida (Bohning, n.d.). Several media outlets in the US indicated that they had received this information before *WikiLeaks* published, but declined to publish as it was a threat to “national security”. On the contrary, a different picture is seen being displayed in Kenya where journalists received classified information but without giving much thought, went ahead to publish. A good example is statistics given from the Global Terrorism Database which used information from Nation Newspaper indicating that;

“Almost four years after Kenya launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab in Somalia, *Nation Newsplex* has looked at how the action changed Kenya. The analysis

found that there was a steep increase in terrorist attacks since October 2011. Attacks in the 45 months since *Operation Linda Nchi* began were nine times the attacks 45 months before the mission” (Daily Nation Friday, October 16, 2015 — updated on August 20, 2021).

Such information sounds classified and can appropriately be shared with policymakers in the security and intelligence offices of the government to allow them to ponder through the next steps.

Therefore, the major question here is; at what point should reporters put aside their professional and career interests for the sake of national security? Should press limits be self-imposed? What obligations do journalists have when it obtains information with national security implication?

### Objectives

This study sought to investigate the complex relationship between journalistic activities and national security by answering the following questions:

- 1) At what point should reporters put aside their professional and career interests for the sake of national security?
- 2) Should press limits be self-imposed?
- 3) What obligations do journalists have when it obtains information with national security implication?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an elusive relationship between national security and the media (Journalists). Freedom of expression and free media, which are the basic instruments of democracy provide terror groups and their counterparts the publicity they need to inform the public about their operations and goals, sometimes causing unnecessary panic among citizens. Cohen-Almagor (2001), Jackson (1990), Kampf, (2014) indicate that journalists are terrorists’ best friend. Larry Grossmann, the president of NBC News unapologetically indicates that;

*The job of the press is not to worry about the consequences of its coverage but to tell the truth.... As much as those of us in the press (journalists, editors etc.), would like to be popular and loved, it is more important that we are accurate and fair....and let the chips fall where they may (Larry Grossmann).*

Kenya's constitution under articles 33, 34 and 35 of the CoK 2010 comprises protections on freedom of the press and freedom of expression. This is because; journalists and media outlets provide access to information about governments activities and allow citizens to give their

opinion about it. However, government officials have unveiled intolerance for critical media, by introducing restrictive legislation that has been invoked to arrest journalists and their media outlets (Kibet, 2015). Journalists are at risk of harassment and being attacked while carrying out their tasks.

Reporters without Borders' (RSF, n.d.) World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) ranked Kenya 102 out of 180 countries with a score of 33.65%, which is an improvement in ranking by one place and a decrease by the score of -0.07 from 2020. The RSF (n.d.) notes that despite the guarantees in the 2010 Constitution, respect for freedom of the media in Kenya is dependent on the political environment and this is likely to continue impacting the freedom and independence of the media (Freedom House, n.d.).

Some scholars, namely Kelsey (2015), Livingston (2019), and McDonald (2013a) have even expressed concern that the rampant harassment jeopardizes the freedom that journalists have, to express themselves through their work. Contrariwise, looking at the implications that some of the articles have had on national security of Kenya, the question we ask is, which is important or which comes first; national security at large or freedom of expression.

Free speech and free media which is a basic instrument of every democracy has been accused of providing publicity to matters of security concern such as terrorist activities, they have been accused of discrediting government activities that are key in safeguarding territorial integrity of a state, as well as feeding the enemy with classified information that is supposed to be held secret (Dowling, 1986). Mbijjwe, a security consultant in Kenya indicated that, the failure of safeguarding Kenya's territorial integrity was not on the happenings in the neighboring country, but that Kenya had not done enough for its homeland security after going to war, exposing the country to terror attacks. Did Journalists contribute to these? That covering some of the episodes was ethically problematic, allowing the enemy to know more than they needed to? As Lowenthal (2017) indicates, the government might have limited options to prevent the media from reporting information it has obtained, even if it is classified. However, journalists need to understand that freedom to publish is not the same as "the people's right to know".

### **Professional and career interests versus national security**

Robinson (n.d.) advises that, while it is good to report happenings as they take place, journalists should not offer offenders a stage for glorifying themselves. He continues to indicate that journalists should be conscious of the sensitive nature of their reports that implicate on national security. Journalists can take control of the flow

of information by considering their own ways of circumventing around what is happening without necessarily causing a danger to the national security of a country including the soldiers in the field. It is well understood that when covering national security issues, journalists do encounter complex matters which may provide assistance to those who would do harm to the country. However, exposing the deaths and casualty's resultant from any battle exposes the ineffectiveness of a country's security tactics to the terror groups. Such articles only confirm what Surette and Otto (2002) established through a survey that, journalists publish reports on war and other security threats in a populist and dramatic manner using different techniques to attract people's attention. Their selective reports about war and violence do not reflect the nature and extent of war presented in official statistics and victimization surveys.

According to Ngwainmbi (2019), Governments and the general public have different opinions of what roles media play. On the one hand, enemies of the government such as terror groups and militia look at media as a collaborator since they publicize their events whether it's hurting national security or not, while on the other hand, governments try to suppress this by all means (McDonald, 2013b). Research conducted by Raphael Perl of Defense Division Research services in the USA government in 2017 argued that, terrorists position themselves with media personnel in order to receive publicity from them. They could even go as far as pursuing control of small and medium news organizations by funding their programs. In such instances these media houses and their journalists are required to cover terror events and become an eye of the arms of government that deal with national security.

Therefore, it is crucial to find the right way to check on journalists' activities and who funds their programs without necessarily infringing on their freedom. Media activities must be considered when forging national security policies as failure to recognize them might threaten the territorial integrity of a country owing to the important role; they play in dissemination of government activities as well as other parties' activities (Zhang, 2011). Terrorist need publicity in order to promote their cause, and since the media tends to report all sides of a story, they expect segments of the public to have a favorable understanding of their message. Simply put, terrorists see the media as their ally. Raphael (2008), of the Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service in the US has successfully argued that terrorists' sympathetic personnel in press position particularly in wire services and in some instances may even seek to control smaller news organizations through funding and seek to court, or place, sympathetic personnel in press positions, particularly in wire services and in some instances may even seek to control smaller news organizations through funding. For governments, the media defend national interests when covering terrorist

events; it should serve as the eye of the government and defend public programs designed to counter terrorist plots and actions. Terrorists need publicity in order to promote their cause, and since the media tends to report all sides of a story, they expect segments of the public to have a favorable understanding of their message. Simply put, terrorists see the media as their ally. Therefore, an important lesson to learn from the Israeli situation is that the power of the media in reporting, analyzing, and capturing images of military involvement around the world must be considered in the forging and execution of national security decision making (McDonald, 2013c; Zhang, 2011). Failure to appreciate the media's influence will likely result in eroding public support for national strategy and policy reversals. Although the media is often portrayed as the villain in national security decision making, it performs an important role altogether.

### **Imposing press limits**

Should press limits be self-imposed? According to Abel (2006), the media play a key role in safeguarding of human rights. They have the ability to expose human rights violations while offering an arena for diverse voices to be heard in the public. However, this power can be easily misused to the extent that the actual functioning of democracy is threatened. Several media outlets in African countries have been turned into propaganda amplifiers for the tyrants in power, while other media incite hatred against vulnerable groups (Kelsey, 2015; Mills, 2008; and Nacos, 2016).

Political activity mostly concerned with national security is a step above propaganda (Lowenthal, 2017). Every political leadership worries about its national integrity and security. Therefore, they could use the power that the media has to propel false fear amongst the enemy. According to an article by Raphael (2008), the tactic used by Al-Shabaab is known as PSYOPS (Psychological Operations). Al-Shabaab took advantage of the lack of transparency from its adversaries, comprising some governments, together with the demand by some international media outlets for details from the battleground, by framing itself as a trustworthy source on the ground hence twisting the information. According to this author, PSYOPS comprises the group's broader messaging operations as well as warfare campaigns. In its PSYOPS strategy, the Al-Shabaab strives to sway internal politics in East African countries, as a way of gaining traction on the battlefield in Somalia. Therefore, media houses and their journalists find themselves in this mix. To avert such predispositions, the media fraternity needs to have a system of self-regulation which is based on an established code of ethics and a mechanism to receive and respond to complaints, for instance through an ombudsman or a media council.

The idea of self-regulation springs out of the desire by

quality-conscious journalists and media to correct their mistakes and to make themselves accountable to the public. One purpose is to develop ethical principles, which would protect individuals or groups from unacceptable abuse in the media (Zhang, 2011).

According to Pratt (2013), exaggeration of stories concerning national security and terrorism has become common world over, which cultivates feelings of insecurity among civilians. This promotes a siege mentality. It is indicated that misinformation and propaganda can thrive in situations of scarce or partial access to trustworthy alternative sources of information. It can also cause fear among citizens to an extent that they imagine the government has been defeated. These could translate into protests or lack of trust to the government of the day.

Ross (2011) indicates that, the single way upon which media freedom can be matched with matters of national security concerns lie in imposing of regulations. The biggest question is who imposes these regulations? Are they self-imposed by the journalists? Imposed by the owners of the media houses or by the government? According to Ross (2011), self-regulation aids in maintaining the media's credibility with the public. It shows that they are not irresponsible. It will ensure that they are condemned for their professional misconduct, not by the government but by their peers in the profession. However, do the journalists live up to these standards? One purpose is to develop ethical principles, which would protect individuals or groups from unacceptable abuse in the media.

### **Journalist obligations when they obtain information with national security implication**

According to Kibet (2015) journalism empowers reporters to report professionally without feeding the flames of conflict.

Lowenthal (2017) indicates that, governments across the world incline towards suppressing democratic discourse through the media by overturning free speech in the pretense of protecting national security interests. However, contrariwise, the intelligence arm of the government compels some information to be classified on 'need to know' basis. He further indicates that, where security issues are concerned, civilians believe that it is their right to know while the security machinery believes that there are limitations on what should be laid bare in the public domain. 'Ross (2011) argues that, journalists and editors usually confuse quantity for quality, assuming that more details or information (sometimes unnecessary information) could compensate for a lack of quality and new perceptions. Hence, such kind of journalism leads to terror groups or militia groups to entertain more ideas of the same kind. Some observers have even expressed concern that, looking at the implications that some of the

articles have had on national security of Kenya, the question we ask is, which is important or which comes first; national security at large or freedom of expression. There is a delicate relationship between journalism/media and national security. Free speech and free media which is a basic instrument of every democracy has been accused of providing publicity to matters of security concern such as terrorist activities, they have been accused of discrediting government activities that are key in safeguarding territorial integrity of a state, as well as feeding the enemy with classified information that is supposed to be held secret (Dowling 1986). Therefore, this study investigates how journalists, and their media houses put Kenya's national security into an uncomfortable position during operation *Linda Nchi* period between October 2011 and March 2012. As Lowenthal (2017) indicates, the government might have limited options to prevent the media from reporting information it has obtained, even if it is classified. However, journalists need to understand that freedom to publish is not the same as "the people's right to know".

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed thematic analysis. The analysis used newspapers drawn randomly from publications by The Daily Nation newspaper and the standard newspapers in Kenya between October 2011 and February 2012. It searched for narratives that undermined government efforts to safe guard national security, narratives that caused fear among citizens, and narratives that undermined the Kenya Defense forces' efforts in fighting the Al-Shabaab. Data was classified into three thematic areas according to the above. The data was then uploaded into the coding sheet and analyzed using NVivo software. The 18 newspapers picked were based on the credibility rating of these papers in Kenya and the wide reach they had across East Africa.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **At what point should journalists put aside their professional and career interests for the sake of national security?**

From the analysis of the codes, the study found out that 64% of the articles exposed government moves geared towards protecting Kenya's national security. On 16th October 2011, an article on the Daily Nation newspaper by Fred Mukinda, with the title; "*Kenyan Forces Go After Raiders inside Somalia*" gave details of how Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) have approached the al-Shabaab territory. One of the paragraphs indicated that '*Internal Security permanent secretary Francis Kimemia said security forces had drawn up strategies to defeat al Shabaab in their own land.*'

By looking at how this article had been framed; anger could actually be aroused among the enemy and their supporters especially seeing the phrase "*defeat... in their own land*". Such narratives could easily have made

the Al-Shabaab terrorists and their sympathizers to get angry and want to fight even harder. Even though journalists are supposed to set headlines that will spark interest from its readers, the best idea is to give it a thought. How could this be written without necessarily causing panic from the enemy hence making them want to retaliate?

On 19th October 2011, an article in the Daily Nation newspaper indicated that; '*In terms of injuries, the first attack saw the death of 73 al Shabaab insurgents, only Kenyan deaths were five killed in a helicopter crash,*' the same article continued to indicate that; '*Heavy military equipment was stuck on the muddy road to Afmadow town, the army spokesman said*'

This is a bit irresponsible as you do not announce the number of enemies killed versus the number of your servicemen killed, showing how you have done a good job yet indicate in the same article that what helped you to do the good job is non-functional at the moment; '*equipment was stuck on the muddy road.*' What stops the enemy from taking advantage of the opportunity? Later on, during the same day, another article was published by Leftie (2011) on the same newspaper, showing how the then foreign affairs minister and a delegation from Kenya to Somalia were almost killed by an Al-Shabaab bomb. Could this be retaliation to the news earlier own published of the number of Al-Shabaab fighters killed? The article indicated that; '*Foreign Affairs minister Moses Wetangula has said the Kenya delegation to Somalia narrowly escaped a bomb attack in the capital Mogadishu that killed five people after changing their travel plans at the last minute*'. As much as it was good for the public to know what was happening, these journalists should have camouflaged some of the words being used to report the incident to avoid causing panic to the Kenyan public. "Narrow escape from bomb attack" should have been rephrased.

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the standard newspaper published; '*A vehicle ferrying Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination papers and a security base came under heavy gunfire in separate attacks by suspected Al Shabaab militants....it was also revealed that there was a crisis at the Dadaab refugee camps as teachers employed by the UN and who were expected to invigilate the KCPE examinations in the camps had fled.*'

On November 12th, the daily nation reported that: '*Al-Shabaab militia have changed tact and returned to guerrilla tactics, a military officer said, indicating that Kenya's engagement in Somalia is likely to be lengthy.*'

Robinson (n.d.) advises that, while it is good to report happenings as they take place, journalists should not offer offenders a stage for glorifying themselves. He continues to indicate that journalists should be conscious of the sensitive nature of their reports that implicate on national security. From the above two extracts on November 9th and 12th respectively, caution was thrown to the wind. This information clearly establishes how the

Al-Shabaab is causing havoc to the normal running of Kenya's government activities such as a major exam like KCPE.

These were astonishing, as such information should be held in confidence. Journalists can take control of the flow of information by considering their own ways of circumventing around what is happening without necessarily causing a danger to the national security of a country including the soldiers in the field. It is well understood that when covering national security issues, journalists do encounter such complex matters which may provide assistance to those who would do harm to the country. However, exposing the deaths and casualty's resultant from the battle exposes the ineffectiveness of a country's security tactics to the terror groups. Such articles only confirm what Surette and Otto (2002) established through a survey that, journalists publish reports on war and other security threats in a populist and dramatic manner using different techniques to attract people's attention. Their selective reports about war and violence do not reflect the nature and extent of war presented in official statistics and victimization surveys.

### **Should press limits be self-imposed?**

From the analysis, the study established that 57% of the articles caused fear among citizens by exposing the attacks to Al-Shabbab hence retaliation was eminent. This begged the question, should press limits be self-imposed?

On 2nd November 2011, an article in the daily nation indicated that; *"a convoy of Kenya Army officers, who were going to reinforce officers at Amuma, was attacked by suspected Al-Shabaab militants. Three of the officers were injured"*.

Such information is good to know but not by the public because it serves to create more fear. If the gallant men (military officers) were being attacked in broad daylight, then what would happen to civilians? Do journalists understand the magnitude of fear they could be creating by such openness?

On 4th November 2011, two articles from the Daily nation and Standard newspapers report the same incident *"boat being sunk by Kenya Navy killing 8 occupants"* but the identity of the occupants is reported differently by the media houses as follows:

Daily nation: *The Kenya Navy on Friday sunk another boat suspected of transporting Al-Shabaab militants. It was the second boat the Kenya Navy has sunk in two days following Tuesday's incident when Kenyan troops killed 18 Al-Shabaab militants after sinking a ship transporting fuel in Kuday area inside Somalia waters.*

The standard Newspaper: *There were conflicting reports over an attack on a boat sunk by the Kenya Navy*

*in the Ras Kamboni area. Whereas the Kenyan military reported the Navy hitting the boat after defying orders "to stop for identification", reports from Lamu indicated the occupants were fishermen. Mr. Sheikh Swaleh Abdulrahman Friday protested that eight fishermen had been killed, one of them his relative whom he identified as Issa Yusuf.*

Looking at the above information by two leading media houses in Kenya, it would be good if such information would be regulated and kept off the public. As much as it helps to send fear signals to the Al-Shabaab militants, what does it do to the Kenyan public as well as the rest of the world? There is no clear evidence whether the eight people killed were Al-Shabaab militants or Kenyan fishermen. According to Pratt (2013), exaggeration of stories concerning national security and terrorism has become common world over, which cultivates feelings of insecurity among civilians. This promotes a siege mentality. It is indicated that misinformation and propaganda can thrive in situations of scarce or partial access to trustworthy alternative sources of information. Some of the newspaper extracts are discussed below to show the severity of the information being laid bare.

On November 15th 2011, the standard newspaper (2011) published that; *Kenya gets backing against Al Shabaab. Countries contributing troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) were meeting on Monday alongside regional nations to discuss the future of the mission. African Union representative Lulit Kebede said defense ministers from Uganda and Burundi, which both have troops in Somalia, and "interested countries" Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia, will attend the closed meeting.*

This is good for the public to know but it would be better without details. The information of countries interested and who will attend should have been kept silent to avoid the insurgents targeting these countries.

On the same November 15th, a separate article in the daily nation indicated that; *At least three huge explosions rocked regions held by the extremist groups on Sunday, witnesses said on Monday. However, it was unclear who had launched the missiles. The attacks came as Kenya secured growing international support for the military operation in Somalia against Al-Shabaab.*

Looking at how media reported these incidences, it sent chilling messages to everyone, both the public and the militants. In fact, the Associated Press (AP) wrote another article almost immediately asking 'Who's bombing Somalia? French, US trade blame?' It continued to say, *'When thundering explosions rattled a small Somali town during a meeting of Islamist insurgent leaders, it sent them scurrying for safety. An international military appears to have launched the powerful, well-timed attack, but no one will admit it.'*

Due to exposure of such incidences to the public through the media, several attacks continued to happen on Kenyan soil affecting all including children.

To avert such predispositions the media fraternity needs to have a system of self-regulation which is based on an established code of ethics and a mechanism to receive and respond to complaints, for instance through an ombudsman or a media council. The idea of self-regulation springs out of the desire by quality-conscious journalists and media to correct their mistakes and to make themselves accountable to the public. One purpose is to develop ethical principles, which would protect individuals or groups from unacceptable abuse in the media.

### **What obligations do journalists have when it obtains information with national security implication?**

The study found out that, 81% of the articles did not care about secrecy of information as they exposed crucial information from the government that could endanger Kenya's national security. Some article excerpts are shared to indicate the level of carelessness by the journalists during this crucial period.

An article by Sigei and Bocha, which appeared on the Daily Nation of October 21st 2011 indicated that; "*Kenya Targets al Shabab's Lifeline*," the article had information on how the KDF are going to zero into the enemy. Part of the article read; '*While the ground troops close in on Kismayu from the south, the Navy will attack from the North, sealing any possible exit points for both the militants and the pirates through the Indian Ocean*. It is all clear that the journalism ethics and standards require all journalists to operate with truthfulness and accuracy, but how about the principle that advises them to observe "limitation of harm"? From this narrative, one can actually fear for the parties that are participating in the war because their strategy has been revealed to all. As much as it could be a tactic to make the Al-Shabaab see the seriousness with which the KDF are working, the opposite could also be true. The following day, after the article by the two journalists had been published, Fox news published; "*U.S. Warns Imminent Terrorist Attack on Kenya is Possible*." Part of the publication indicated that; *Al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab militants from neighboring Somalia have vowed to carry out an attack on Kenya for sending troops into Somalia*. This established that the Al-Shabaab are keen on what the media is publishing and planning their retaliations accordingly. This could pass for immature and irresponsible behavior from the part of individual journalists and begs the question; what obligations do journalists have when it obtains information with national security implication? If journalists want to live to their mandate of informing the public, then it could be prudent for them to weigh the options between informing the public versus the same public being harmed because of the same information that is out in the public.

On October 28th 2011, the daily nation published; "9

*Shabaab Men Killed in Battle with Kenyan Army*," The same article also indicated that, "*Two Kenyan soldiers were injured, one critically during the fire exchange and were airlifted to the Advanced Dressing Station in Garissa for treatment .It was the first time the Kenyan troops were encountering resistance from the militants since they started Operation Linda Nchi....In Parliament, Foreign Affairs assistant minister Richard Onyonka appeared to have thrown a cat among pigeons when he declared that the government is ready to negotiate with the Al-Shabaab for an end to the current military operation if the group renounces violence and stops its actions there*".

Looking at the information being shared by the journalists above; it seems that the KDF which is well trained and equipped is being attacked as its soldiers are facing resistance from the terrorists. In fact, the journalist goes ahead to indicate that there is resistance to an extent that the assistant minister for foreign affairs back home (in Kenya) declares that the government is ready to negotiate with the illegal group. Well, if that is the truth, the public should not be told. This should be information for policy makers and not the public. According to Kibet (2015), there is a fact to note that in Israel, the military actions are highly guarded and secretive in the amount of information disclosed for public consumption through the media. This is because; there is a cordial relationship between state security and the media. Journalists have been taken through security awareness programmes and have been trained on how to handle the information of national security concerns to avoid causing harm to an already critical situation. Could this be what the Kenyan journalists are lacking?

### **Conclusion**

This study established the following conclusions based on content analyzed; Journalists and their media houses have a symbiotic relationship with the security arms of government and this cannot be ignored. The public needs to be informed about what the government is doing at all times, and the security officials need the support of media to create and maintain public support for all their activities concerning national security and more. Whereas independent reporting is essential to hold the security powers to account, the media are required to be very vigilant on the kind of language they use to inform the public. The choice of words in reporting security matters must be marked by the high level of restraint on the side of journalists (Cohen-Almagor, 2005). The Kenyan constitution under article 33 assures every citizen the right of access to information held by the government. On the other hand, due to national security concerns, the government requires some information to be classified so that access to such information is restricted on 'need to know'. The public believes it is the right of every citizen to



know everything being done by the government while the security machinery in government believes that there are limitations on what information should be laid bare in the public domain.

Experts from national security studies advise that, as much as there is little contention over the need to have a strong national defense and an autonomous press, varied opinions occur when the two are perceived to overlap (Dworznic, 2016). This conflict becomes more apparent when media outlets decide to publish classified information identified by the government as crucial to withhold in the interest of national security. According to Jackson (1990), achieving harmony on the proper balance between media press freedom that leads to openness and secrecy has remained elusive. Therefore, for the sake of national security the study concludes that, the media could help to spread word about terror activities or other fearful activities to the public around the world, however, journalists should strive to resort to responsible terminology which does not help the enemy in their attempt to undermine national security. Secondly, there needs to be a clear difference between covering news and providing the enemy an equal platform to declare their agenda (McDonald, 2013d). Hence, to remain objective, for the sake of national security concerns, journalists and their media houses should never give the enemy the same airtime as the government as this is betraying their ethics and morality. Thirdly, interviewing members of a terror group or the enemy by journalists while an operation is ongoing is ethically wrong. Why would they be given airtime to chest thump yet innocent civilians are being harmed? Scholars indicate that interviews under such circumstances are an express reward to the enemy which undermines the government's efforts to maintain national security and integrity of its borders. This can clearly interfere with the efforts to resolve an ongoing crisis. Furthermore, it is believed that such interviews increase the magnitude of the event and impede negotiations between the government and the enemy while spreading fear among the civilians (Ross, 2011).

Consequently, there is an urgent need to develop a set of guidelines for the media when covering matters of national security. This step will aid in increasing professional as well as ethical conduct by journalists and editors. All media professionals who are selected to cover items of national security concern need to have some background information about the ongoing event if it concerns national security. Some background research should be done before the news is published. This helps the journalists to understand the magnitude of their reportage to national security as reporting any details might harm the country.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

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*Full Length Research Paper*

# The semiotic guerrilla: Internet subcultures as political resistance in China

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**This paper adopts a critical discourse analysis in combination with in-depth interviews of 55 people to examine three representative cases of Internet subcultures created and practiced by Chinese netizens from 2009, in order to define the formats, strategies and tactics of these subcultures in relation to the broader mainstream political culture. The paper finds that the Chinese subculturists employ tactics of homophony and neologism made possible by the highly contextual Chinese language; the participants are aware of the appropriation of traditional Confucian ethics by the Party-state to legitimize its rule and devise targeted strategies of resistance accordingly; but their cynical attitude towards the dominant political culture prevents them from affecting real political change beyond mere defiance at the semiotic level.**

**Key words:** State censorship, cultural resistance, subcultures, post-subcultures, Chinese Internet.

## INTRODUCTION

The virtual ban in China on “offline” political activities, such as protests, demonstrations and unofficial assemblies, has made the Internet the main tool and scene of the resistance to the authoritarian Party-state by Chinese netizens in a variety of areas, including freedom of speech, gender equality, the one-child policy and autonomy over their own lifestyle (Gong and Yang, 2010; Qiu 2013). In response to this, the state has been tightening its grip on the Internet by shrinking the space of online expression and censoring potentially controversial content. This, however, has provoked further rebellion among Internet users (Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Creemers, 2017). As a result, the Chinese

Internet as cultural space is turned into a complex of contradictions characterized by both activist resistance and firm government control (Yang, 2003).

With political expression and criticism of social injustice heavily suppressed, Chinese netizens have come to resort to a particular form of online resistance characterized by culture- and entertainment-based memes with political messages embedded in them. It is a postmodernist approach that re-creates existing content (language, imagery, video, etc.) in a way that is humorous or sarcastic (or *egao*, to use a popular Chinese slang) enough to stay out of the censors’ line of sight but still able to subtly convey dissent (Esarey and Xiao, 2011;

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Jacobs, 2012; Mackinnon, 2008; Tang, 2013).

Naturally, it is hard to foresee with certainty what this type of resistance can eventually lead to. Some scholars see the emergence of an important form of grassroots democracy in this postmodernist online culture for its carnivalesque spirit and unconventional attitude towards “mainstream” and “officialdom” that continually press the Party-state to open up more space for expression (Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Tang and Yang, 2011). Others disagree: this linguistic or semiotic resistance in vogue among people living under a repressive government is essentially “slacktivism” that indulges netizens in online defiance at the expense of meaningful, engaged activism in the real world, which will eventually lead them to inadvertently support both the state and the market (Morozov, 2011; Wallis, 2015). What is certain, though, is that the Internet-based subcultures have expanded room for expression, heightened the visibility of non-mainstream lifestyles and allowed Chinese Internet users to criticize the government in subtle ways (Chen, 2014; King et al., 2013; Yang 2009). Investigation into the evolution of such cultural practices, therefore, becomes key to understanding the politics of contemporary Chinese digital media culture and China’s broader political culture in the Internet age.

This paper applies the post-subcultural theory to the methods of critical discourse analysis and in-depth interviews to examine the online subcultures created and practiced by Chinese netizens in the decade 2009-2018 with three goals in mind: First, map the characteristics of such subcultures in terms of formats, strategies and tactics; second, interrogate their interplay with the dominant political culture in China; and third, building upon the first two goals, attempt to theorize the (sub-)cultural resistance rooted in the Chinese politico-cultural context that goes beyond the cliché of the “freedom versus control” model.

### **The post-subcultural theory within the Chinese context**

Subculture has long been seen as separate from, or rebelling against, mainstream culture in a multitude of aspects, including values, beliefs, symbols and styles. It is often able to achieve a certain level of autonomy with its particular spaces and networks for meanings (Haenfler, 2010; Hodgkinson, 2002; Williams, 2011). Best positioned to analyze this culture in the Internet age is post-subcultural theory. Born in the 1990s and coming into powerful force at the turn of the century, it is seen as the critique and correction of the classic subcultural theory championed by the Birmingham School, which emphasizes class as the central dimension of forming subcultures and considers subculture as a representation of class struggles. Influenced by postmodernism, post-subcultural theory rejects the CCCS-derived versions of

subcultural theory for their inability to escape the traps of determinism and essentialism due to their over-emphasis on the class, race and gender attributes of cultural identity, which renders them incapable of dealing with the contemporary global subculture (Muggleton, 2000; Sweetman, 2013). To post-subcultural theorists, the cultural identity of youth, molded by new technological and cultural forces, especially globalization and the rise of the Internet, has become increasingly reflexive, fluidly and fragmented. The distinctly political subculture in the traditional sense has evolved into a “style-based youth culture” (Bennett, 2004, 2011).

Under such theoretical guidance, scholars developed a number of conceptual frameworks to analyze specific cultural forms to replace the research paradigm of the Birmingham School or even the very concept of subculture. Maffesoli (1996, 98), for instance, uses the term “neo-tribe” to describe contemporary youth culture that is rather “a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor appearance and form”. Similarly, Chaney (1996) further develops the concept of lifestyle, first proposed by Max Weber, by regarding lifestyle as a type of “creative project” based on acts of consumption. Also influential among post-subcultural scholars is the conceptualization of “scene” by Straw (1991) that renounces the traditional definition of subculture based on the fixity of class and community in favor of highlighting the constant evolution and often transient nature of collective youth activity. These conceptual frameworks, different as they are on the surface, share the same core theory that stresses the individuality and non-fixity of contemporary youth culture and youth collectivity which demand rigorous contextualized, ethnographic research.

Post-subcultural theory has been attacked from many angles since its conception, but the opponents have always stayed within the usual criticism of the various post- theories. Nevertheless, this paper believes in the value of post-subcultural theory in investigating China’s online subcultures, for two main reasons. Firstly, post-subcultural theory contextualizes subculture, or engages in what Jensen (2018) describes as a multidimensional, culture understanding of identities in cultural studies. China’s cultural traditions and political reality, vastly different from those in Western societies, make the country inhospitable to the essentialist framework of the Birmingham School. The clear lack of class factors in China’s cultural resistance is a telling example. Secondly, the stringent censorship of explicit political speech and radical expression in China has driven netizens to indirect forms of resistance, including jokes, wordplay, picture/video reediting, meme creation, etc. (Tsui, 2003), making this subculture highly stylized or aestheticized. In other words, the common language of the subcultural resistance is not straightforward political discourse, but politicized consumption activities built around symbols or images. Therefore, post-subcultural theory, with its

emphasis on the constant evolving and often transient nature of symbols and its interpretations of the multi-ethnic and cross-class forms of affiliation (Mitchell 1996), can serve as a particularly effective tool in the effort to investigate the uniqueness of subcultural practices of Chinese netizens.

Firstly, post-subcultural theory contextualizes subculture, or engages in what Jensen (2018) describes as a multidimensional, culture understanding of identities in cultural studies. China's cultural traditions and political reality, vastly different from those in Western societies, make the country inhospitable to the essentialist framework of the Birmingham School. The clear lack of class factors in China's cultural resistance is a telling example. The loose virtual community of subcultures is made up of disparate people with specific issues and causes, as opposed to a tight group solidified by lasting class interests. Furthermore, members of this community do not share the same cultural identity. This requires researchers to immerse themselves in specific temporal-spatial contexts to examine this group as insiders. Given that most of the studies on China that use CCCS frameworks have failed to reach insightful conclusions (Liu and Xie, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017), it is imperative that a new framework be developed that is informed by post-subcultural theory and rooted in Chinese conditions.

Secondly, the stringent censorship of explicit political speech and radical expression in China has driven netizens to indirect forms of resistance, including jokes, wordplay, picture/video reediting, meme creation, etc. (Tsui, 2003), making this subculture highly stylized or aestheticized. In other words, the common language of the subcultural resistance is not straightforward political discourse, but politicized consumption activities built around symbols or images. In some cases, the act of resistance by creating and consuming symbols bears more significance than the issue at hand (e.g. freedom of expression) and evolves into a universal online lifestyle, which may provide an opening for scholars to examine "the rest of life," or, in the words of Hodkinson (2016, 638), "[h]ow participation in any particular cultural grouping connects to the range of other spaces, networks and affiliations of importance to participants." Therefore, post-subcultural theory, with its emphasis on the constant evolving and often transient nature of symbols and its interpretations of the multi-ethnic and cross-class forms of affiliation (Bennett, 2000; Mitchell, 1996), can serve as a particularly effective tool in the effort to investigate the uniqueness of subcultural practices of Chinese netizens.

The existing literature has laid a firm foundation for this paper. The gender-based analysis by Wallis (2015) of three illustrative cases of gender-based production of subculture exposes the discursive collusion between the Internet subculture in China and patriarchy and misogyny, warns against the academic tendency to happily glorify any form of resistance and finally demonstrates the need to confront the flaws of online resistance within the

framework of China's post-socialist gender politics. Chen (2014) surveys the popularity of the North American rage comics among young Chinese on the Internet by mapping the ways in which the riotous humor has been able to cross cultural boundaries in China's cyber space, and recognizes the political significance of this subculture for having created room for emotional and political catharsis despite the unlikelihood that it will ever lead to political reform. Research by Qiu (2013) on the *feizhuliu* culture questions how articulations of female gender and sexuality relate to broader cultural politics in contemporary China and sheds light on the tensions between the so-called Chinese modernities and the different modernities reflected in certain forms of online subcultures and the gendered identities they construct. As illuminating as they are, the papers have mainly focused on individual cases without attempting to define the changing patterns of online resistant culture of Chinese netizens, youth or from other age groups, and have not taken the trouble to develop a native Chinese theory. Which is why this paper, building on the existing literature, sets out to answer three questions: One, are there general patterns to how the Internet subculture is formed? Second, how is this subculture politicized or depoliticized in its interaction with political structures, especially government censorship? Third, as the most important form of resistance in today's China, what potential influence will the Internet subculture have on the country's political culture?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology of this paper takes a two-pronged approach. Firstly, a critical discourse analysis is applied to three representative cases of Internet-based resistance from 2009 to 2019: the "grass mud horse" phenomenon that started in 2009, the "toad worship" in 2014, and the Peppa Pig culture in 2017. These are chosen for several reasons. Firstly, these three have had a widespread influence on contemporary Chinese society and culture where the writers of the paper have had intensive, firsthand experience of these subcultures as regular users of the Chinese Internet during the past 10 years, and a review of existing literature shows that these three are more typical than other subcultures and have all been hot topics for global media coverage. For example, *The New York Times* have covered all these three cases with in-depth reporting and commentaries, attracting wide attention of Chinese politics observers to Chinese netizens' creativities. Although naturally becoming the target of nationwide government crackdowns as of their inceptions, these three cultures have shown incredible staying power in the digital world. Their army of followers "hide" in different digital spaces, abiding their time to launch a quick "ambush" of subcultural signifying practices, before going in hiding again, leaving no trace to the censors. The "toad worship" subculture has even migrated to Facebook (blocked in China) as its new home with a large and growing fanbase. One Facebook fan group for "toad worshippers" where we recruit interviewees has over 7,000 active members, most of whom are Chinese nationals according to their names. Secondly, all three have taken a form of resistance to the mainstream political culture in China characterized by suppression of individual expression in the name of maintaining social stability, solidification of cultural stratification and order,

blurring of lines between the Party, the state and society, and exaltation of an ascetic, puritanical lifestyle (Hua and Nathan, 2015). In other words, on the symbolic, narrative and expressive levels, all three subcultures have set out to flaunt freedom of speech, break down cultural stratification, uncouple discursively the Party-state and society, and revel in secular (and sometimes vulgar) joy, albeit in ways that are mostly playful and sarcastic. Lastly, the three subcultures, however, different from each other form a historical continuum. The “grass mud horse” is a forthright strategy of confrontation that graphically denounces Internet censorship in an almost obscene language, incurring therefore the harshest crackdowns; in contrast, the “toad worship” has developed a sophisticated system of symbols that employ subtle and clever wordplay in nuanced stories spread across a wide range of mediums (such as T-shirts, mugs and illicit fan art and publications), which can be seen as a sign of maturity of Chinese online subcultures but also blunts their political edginess; the Peppa Pig culture, finally, is more fully commercial, given its roots in pop culture (a British cartoon) and viral franchise (stickers, T-shirts, etc.) whose customers have almost given up direct political expression and chosen instead to dissolve political authority with linguistic and cultural pastiche. They represent the stages in the evolution of Chinese Internet subcultures: from the “grass mud horse” to the “toad worship” to then Peppa Pig, a clear line can be drawn towards post-subculture. This will be explained in detail.

This paper does not give an end date to these cultures because even though their posts were deleted en masse by state authorities soon after they appeared, they have not only survived in various forms but managed to spread far and wide, even entering the vocabulary of ordinary people. Documentary data mainly comes from news reports, Weibo and WeChat posts, image and video memes created by social media users, popular video-streaming sites (e.g. bilibili.com). Unfortunately, government censors or platform host companies have deleted most of the content, which is why some data is also supplied by the 55 interviewees of this paper in addition to the content downloaded and saved by the writers of the paper over the past decade. In total, 220 pieces of documentary data (including text, imagery, video, etc.) are used in this research. By analyzing these typical cases, this paper tries to define the general patterns of the online resistant culture by Chinese netizens in order to build a conceptual framework with which to investigate the broader Internet-based cultural resistance in China.

Secondly, complementing the critical discourse analysis are in-depth interviews conducted with 55 people who have been heavy producers and active practitioners of the three cultures. This aims at charting the ways these netizens grapple with the censorship regime and negotiate with the mainstream political culture, with a focus on what these cultures, in particular structures and contexts, can bring about. The interviewees were selected as follows: The researchers, in their data collection stage, identified the uploaders of content in various Internet platforms, then sent out private messages to a number of them requesting an interview. Those who accepted were then asked to recommend other people for interview. In the end, 55 said yes. It needs to be pointed out that uploaders are not necessarily original creators. The anonymous and decentralized nature of online content production makes it difficult to trace back to the first creator of a certain text or narrative. In addition, since all three subcultures have been subjected to government purges, the initial versions of much content on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo may have “disappeared” soon after they appeared; and much of the content still visible on Facebook and Twitter has been “smuggled” out of the country by netizens. This is why we have sought uploaders instead of only creators for the interviews. Nevertheless, even though they were chosen as uploaders, all interviewees told us that they used to or were still actively producing and creating online material related to the three subcultures. It is, therefore, our belief that they fit the criteria for “active subculturists.” Because they lived in different

parts of the world (8 outside China), not all interviews were conducted face-to-face. Specifically, 22 people, who live in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, London or New York, were interviewed in person during the period from September 2017 to December 2019, at 90-120 minutes per interview. The remaining 33 agreed to WeChat video calls at 60-90 minutes per interview. All of them are native Chinese speakers. All interviewees outside China used to be or currently are Chinese students overseas, who claim to become fans when they were in China as young adults, and have kept the affection ever since. 46 were under the age of 35. 40 were male; efforts were made to interview more women but failed, and this may confirm what Evans (2008) terms the “limits of gender in China.” All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion where we encouraged the interviewees to tell us their motivations in becoming part of this resistance, their ways of defying and negotiating with the censorship regime, and if and how this type of participatory cultural practice had changed their political and cultural views.

## FINDINGS: PLAYING WITH CULTURAL TABOOS

### *The Grass Mud Horse: A Profanity Revolution*

The grass mud horse is an Internet phenomenon born in 2009, when a blogger created an entry on Baidu Baike called “The Ten Holy Beasts of the Internet,” and gave the ten imaginary animals their accompanying information, including their appearance, behavior and background story. Of the ten beasts, the horse quickly became viral. It directly resembles the alpaca. It lives in *malegebi* (literally Ma-le Gobi Desert), eats *wocao* (fertile grass), and has a natural enemy—the *hexie* (river crab). A number of songs dedicated to the animal soon appeared, the most famous one using the opening theme of the Chinese version of *The Smurfs* set to new lyrics that recount the heroic story of the GMH defeating the river crab and took its home back. Music videos produced by Chinese fans were uploaded to streaming sites in and outside China, and many versions can still be found on YouTube.

The biggest factor behind the horse’s viral fame on the Internet is its name. The three characters for “grass mud horse” in Mandarin Chinese sound very much like “fuck your mother.” Apart from this vile obscenity, *malegebi* (where it lives) and *wocao* (which it eats) also resemble nasty curses. Its nemesis the *hexie* sounds quite like “harmony/harmonious.” Given that the Party-state was propagandizing aggressively the concept of “harmonious society” borrowed from traditional Confucian ethics, and as a result relentlessly cracks down on speech deemed subversive to online “harmony,” the struggle between the GMH and the river crab serves as a metaphor for Internet users flouting China’s censorship regime. The other nine beasts are named in similar fashion, such as the *fa ke you* (fa ke squid, sounding like “fuck you” in English), and the *ya mie die* (ya mie butterfly, resembling the Japanese phrase “yamete,” meaning “please stop,” that is often heard in Japanese pornography). What sets the GMH apart is that the other 9 animals are pure exercises in vulgarity, but the horse is assigned a political narrative of defiance and resistance. These animals lasted on the

watch of the censors as long as they could because the word-filtering technology at the time was not as sophisticated as today when almost every online platform hires thousands of human “examiners” to make sure there’s no bad word at large (Zhu et al., 2013; Li, 2019), and the unique strength of the Chinese language rich in homonyms allows the creators almost unlimited ways to circumvent the censors.

The birth of the GMH and its viral spread on the Chinese Internet were a direct response to the so-called Campaign to Clean Up the Internet by the national authorities since January 2009. In this round of crackdown that officially targeted “obscene, pornographic and vulgar content,” 1,575 websites were shut down, many of which, however, were closed because of their political dissent. This angered many young Chinese (Tang and Yang, 2011). Indeed, the “holy beasts” were also systematically purged soon after they appeared, but it was too late for the GMH. Mainstream Western media outlets, led by *The New York Times*, devoted ample column space to this horse (Wines, 2009). And the participants of this culture continued to create new forms of wordplay to help the GMH defeat word filters and enjoy a long life. Moreover, it has succeeded in infiltrating the upper echelons of culture producers as a symbol of resistance enveloped in political seriousness. Ai Weiwei, the leading contemporary Chinese artist, created a series of performance art the same year. In one work, he goes fully naked and covers only his private parts with a stuffed GMH (alpaca) toy. In Mandarin, “grass mud horse covering the middle” sounds almost the same as “fuck your mother, Party Central Committee.” This is proof that the creation of the GMH culture inspires serious critical art. Indeed, for an extended period afterwards, Ai, the most prominent dissident artist in China, continued to use the GMH as a subject of his works (Fisher, 2012).

Using homophony and curse words in cultural resistance is nothing new, especially in rock and rap music (DeChaine, 1997; Martinez, 1997), but it has been rare in the Chinese context. And this is an important reason that the GMH has achieved unprecedented popularity as a protest culture. The written word has always occupied a noble place in Chinese history. Dignified and euphemistic, it adheres to the principles that one does not speak of the shortcomings and mistakes of those one respects, and that one should speak not what is contrary to propriety. Confucian traditions hold the purity of language and writing in sanctity, and have always regarded it as a political issue (Gaur, 2000). The government’s suppression of online speech in the name of protecting language purity is only the latest attempt in a long line of cultural regulation dating back centuries. Therefore, the GMH subculture may seem to challenge the censors on the surface, but is in fact subverting the underlying Confucian institutions that have long been used to justify the censorship regime.

The strategy to appropriate core Confucian values, such as harmony and self-discipline, to legitimize state censorship began after the 1989 Tian’anmen crackdown to ply the Party leadership with an alternative to the bankrupt Communist ideology as a tool to control speech and thought; as a result, Confucianism has been playing a semi-religious role in the Party’s state governance ever since (Billioud and Thoraval, 2008). Indeed, the current supreme leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of “personal cultivation” (meaning the individual’s obedience to order) in social harmony, exhorting Chinese citizens to follow the Confucian path of “first personal cultivation, then governing the world” (Chang and Ren, 2018). Against this backdrop, linguistic recreation that rips up classic language rules is often regarded as a sure sign of a debased character and an attempt at transgression, not to be protected as personal freedom of creation. This is what lies behind the regular campaigns by Internet authorities to “regulate” online language, attempting to curb and even stamp out the newest coinages. In July 2019, the Cyberspace Administration of China (the country’s main censoring body) reposted on its official website a politically charged op-ed that calls for stronger regulation of “Internet language as mass communication,” including Chinese-English hybrids and words containing images and symbols, on the grounds that “Internet language may bear such negative implications for security issues concerning language, culture and ideology that high vigilance is needed.” Thus, wordplay in the hands of the producers of the GMH subculture not only serves as an instrument to resist the censorship regime, but also constitutes an important source of politicized pleasure. Going beyond merely seeking political expression by getting around the filtering system with wordplay, the creators of the GMH are essentially trying to dismantle the sacred Chinese traditions of language and writing and to build a new discourse of resistance in their place. This invests in the GMH as a cultural ritual an impact and symbolic meaning that cannot be found in the “resistance by swearing” in the Western context. This is captured in one of the interviews: “The great power of the grass mud horse comes from the fact that it openly savages our cultural taboos. We have been taught since we were kids that you should never say the bad words no matter what kind of shit fucks with you. But in real life, when they fuck with you, you need to fuck back. The grass mud horse is the first shot fired. It tore away the fig leaf. It made us realize that this is war.”

Ironically, China’s Internet filtering system was designed to suppress “impropriety” (Benney 2014; Tang 2014), but it came to serve as the catalyst for a revolution in online language led by the grass mud horse. One interviewee who translated the creature and its narratives into French proclaimed, “We’re angry that we’re not allowed to say certain things, and we are resentful that some words, like harmony, are given new meanings by the censors we

disagree with ... We are deprived of our birthright to use our mother tongue. Eventually this forced us to set our own rules of language." Since 2009, homonyms and swear words have become characteristics of the Chinese resistance, where Internet users have created one GMH-like symbol after another in a guerrilla war with the censors. The rules and tactics of engagement have become increasingly sophisticated and have culminated in the "toad worship" culture we are about to discuss in the next section.

### ***Blessed be the Toad: The politics of counter-idolization***

The second case is about the *moha* culture beginning in 2014. This newly coined Internet slang literally means "worshipping the toad," referring to Jiang Zemin who was the President of China 1993-2003 and the central figure of the so-called third generation of the Communist Party leadership. It is difficult to clearly state exactly when *moha* was born, but it is generally believed to have originated from the WeChat subscription account Seminar on the Selected Essays of Jiang launched in 2014 (later shut down by the government). Before it was taken down, the blog had published a great number of anecdotes, quotes and audio-visual clips of Jiang. This material, along with commentary, was presented in a mock academic or news style in order to avoid attracting the attention of the censors, and its stated mission was to praise Jiang's abilities and accomplishments as a statesman.

*Moha* adopts the strategy of idolization in the form of praise, adulation and well-wishing for Jiang, which is an indirect way to vent dissatisfaction with his successors (especially Xi Jinping who came to power in 2012). But at the same time, this idolization is riddled with sarcasm and mockery. For instance, because Jiang in his big glasses is believed by many to look like a toad (*hama*), the supporters of this culture use *ha* as a codename for him. Because it's pronounced almost the same as the *ha* in "ha ha," which is a different character, many choose to use the former (of toad) to verbalize their online laughter as a way to announce their *moha* membership and seek fellow "worshippers." Therefore, *moha* is also a form of counter-idolization that enables the participants to use fake praise of Jiang to lampoon the puritanical political culture on which the Communist Party has always prided itself. The worshippers call themselves *hasi* (toad fans, who prefer the English spelling *hath*). One interviewee said, "Toad fans have their own system of expression with its internal logic ... Simply put, *moha* is this dismissive attitude towards orthodoxy that believes all things orthodox are the results of manipulation."

A trove of online material has been developed by toad fans, mainly in the form of buzzwords and memes. The former are mostly taken from viral videos of Jiang, the

most famous of which shows one heated exchange he had with a female Hong Kong reporter in 2000. The reporter asks in the video if his support of Hong Kong's leader Tung Chee-hwa seeking a second term means "the Communist Party has handpicked Tung," sending Jiang into a rage. He scolds the woman to her face, and says that Hong Kong reporters "always want to make big news" and "run [over to events] faster than Western reporters" but their questions are always (in English) "too simple, sometimes naïve." He also compares them with the respected American journalist Mike Wallace who is "way better than" Hong Kong reporters and with whom he "talked and laughed." He then softens and says he only wants to teach the reporters some life experience as an "elder" and exhorts them to "raise their journalistic standards." Jiang's outburst in the video is unbecoming of his status as a head of state, but his idiosyncratic mix of languages spoken with a southern Chinese accent is a welcome breath of fresh air for the *haths* who are tired of the rigid Chinese political discourse laden with inscrutable platitudes. These quotes and more, especially his eccentric expressions (e.g. "too simple, sometimes naïve") that deviate from China's political convention, have all gained immense popularity. And the word "elder" has become another codename for Jiang besides *ha*. The memes, on the other hand, are mostly based on his unscripted behavior in publicly available news reports, such as combing his hair in the presence of the King of Spain, and picking his nose in public, etc. They are mostly circulated on WeChat, and the semi-private nature of the platform has allowed them to be spared systematic purges by the government so far. A woman said in her interview that she loved making Jiang memes, because "there's just so much material to choose from. And it's fun and funny. More importantly, it has political meaning. And it gives both parties of the conversation a sense of joy hard to describe in words."

Some observers attribute *moha's* sudden viral status in 2014 directly to the Chinese netizens' disappointment in and resentment of Xi Jinping. Xi had been hailed as a moderate reformer, but his crackdowns on speech, tightening grip on power and creation of a cult of personality since he came to power have plunged China into political oppression (Peng, 2018; Qin, 2015). In sharp contrast, during Jiang's rule at the center of the third generation of Communist leadership, China was more liberal in many ways than it is now, and his public image was much more colorful than the other political leaders. While his two successors graduated from Tsinghua University under tight control by the Communist Party, Jiang received Western-style education before 1949. He speaks a number of foreign languages, including English, Russian and Spanish, and appears to get along with Western values and ideas. In the video analyzed above, he proudly asks, "Which Western country haven't I visited?" As mayor of Shanghai during the 1986 student protest movement, he met with the student leaders and



amazed them by reciting the Gettysburg Address in English in front of them, which worked to considerably diffuse the tension between the two sides. This episode made him a favorite of Deng Xiaoping and later served as a key factor in his being chosen as the supreme figure of the third generation of the Communist Party leadership (Zhao, 2010). The well-read, flamboyant Jiang seems human compared with all the other Communist leaders of China before and after him.

However, most interviewees did not draw a line from liking Jiang to hating on Xi but insisted that they liked the former mainly because of his “charisma.” One man professed his heartfelt fondness of Jiang, who to him was like “an old man who’s kind of smart, kind of funny, but who needs to be humored from time to time” as opposed to a national leader commanding respect from his subjects. Others, meanwhile, saw a deeper reason for their *moha* in its struggle for freedom of sarcastic speech in an oppressive country. In the words of one interviewee, “*Moha* makes me happiest when it creates this entire set of discourse that allows us to invent so many subtle and clever wordplays and expressions that bypass the filtering tools of censorship. After all, the authorities will never ban the character *ha*. This alone can ensure this culture a very long life among us *haths*.”

It needs to be stressed here that the image of Jiang painted by the *moha* culture is not historically accurate. There is no evidence that he was ever more liberal as a political leader than Deng, Hu Jintao or Xi. In certain periods, Jiang is even remembered to have taken a hardline conservative position. This, however, has given the “worshippers” an opportunity to indulge in a special, powerful kind of pleasure by “retelling history.” Mainstream Confucians have long regarded history writing as one of their top priorities, taking great care to compile the so-called “official history” to lend legitimacy to the ruler. History, then, has always been political in China. The Communist Party is awfully attentive to how its own history gets written. Indeed, the field of Party Historiography, a distinctly Chinese branch of history research, is vital to the ideological work of the Party (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 1987). Its political significance comes from its official profiles of principal Party figures. Therefore, by artificially elevating the historical import of Jiang in both achievement and popularity over other leaders, the current supreme leader Xi in particular, *moha* essentially attempts to deconstruct the legitimacy and authority of the official Party history. Precisely for this reason, the Internet users have bestowed on Jiang as a (anti-)idol a persona the exact opposite of the stereotypical image of the stiff, austere CPC leader. Of course, subcultures that seek political expression by creating (anti)idols are nothing new, but the collective subconsciousness of *moha* can be truly understood only in the context of China’s cultural obsession with writing “official history.” A self-styled “crazy toad fan” put it this way, “What’s important is what people choose to believe. Is it the stuff

printed in textbooks and newspapers that brooks no dissent, or our own conclusions through critical thinking ... Toad fans are not stupid. Many people do it because they think it’s fun. But most of us really believe that Jiang is a different kind of leader. And this matters because we truly think so. It’s not forced on us.”

### ***Peppa Pig: My Body is My Weapon***

The third case centers on the viral Peppa Pig phenomenon among Chinese Internet users. It is still evolving, so we name it the Peppa Pig culture as a working term.

*Peppa Pig* is a British animated television series for preschool children which originally aired on May 31, 2004 on Channel 5 in 5-minute episodes. The show revolves around Peppa, a girl pig, and her family and friends. Its Chinese version began broadcasting on the Children’s Channel of China Central Television in 2015, and was later available on iQiyi and other major video-streaming sites. It soon became the most popular foreign cartoon among urban Chinese children, and many young parents who watched the show with their children became Peppa Pig’s first adult fans.

Chinese viewers liked the show due initially to its high production value compared with the shoddy quality that plagues most domestic cartoons. Then, in November 2017, a Peppa Pig video created by a fan and dubbed in the Chongqing dialect was uploaded to Bilibili, a major Chinese video-streaming site for fans of anime, comics and video games. It quickly went viral and garnered one million views in no time. The Peppa Pig subculture of resistance was thus born. Within a few short months, a large number of clips of the show dubbed to different Chinese languages and dialects appeared on Bilibili. The striking incongruities of a typical English middle-class family speaking richly local Chinese dialects were highly amusing to people online who continued to create even more works based on the show.

In December 2017, an article was posted online and was quickly shared by bloggers. Titled “An Exposé on Peppa Pig—Slacking Her Life Away Doing Whatever She Wants Paid for by Her Rich Family of Corporate Executives,” the article offers a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the signs and symbols of the cartoon before concluding, “Peppa Pig’s family belongs to the upper class.” For example, her grandparents live in a giant mansion with a private garden and own a yacht. Her mom who presumably grew up with all this wealth plays the violin and speaks French, a well-educated lady all around. The dad is probably no average Joe either and most likely the Chief Financial Officer of a big corporation. The family even has a private doctor, too. For a simple rash, within 5 min of a call, the doctor will arrive at their door. This funny piece, still being shared today, apparently struck a chord with China’s netizens. It hit a

nerve sensitive to the reality of class and further fueled the online debate over the worsening inequality in China. One man captured the sentiment well: “This one time I needed something for my sore throat. And I waited 4 hours in line at the hospital for the meds ... I can’t deny that this article hit home. I know it’s a cartoon. It’s not real. And the article is intended as humor. But I guess it makes everyone realize that the wealth gap is not something we can avoid talking about.”

As culturally and socially significant this show has come to mean for Chinese people, the most rebellious element of the subculture is nevertheless the appeal of Peppa Pig tattoo stickers. Many people pasted them on their bodies and shared their pictures and videos on such popular short video platforms as Douyin and Kuaishou. It even gave birth to a widespread rhyming catchphrase: Get your Peppa Pig tatt, shout out to your frat (*shehuiren*). This seemingly innocuous act is one of meaningful resistance because tattoos and piercings are abhorrent to mainstream Chinese culture. No less an authority than *The Analects* declares that “Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety.” Chinese culture deems any act that damages one’s body profoundly disrespectful of one’s parents. Appropriating Confucianism as dominant discourse that justifies its control over public cultures, the government similarly frowns upon tattoos which are associated by most people with gangsters and members of the mafia. Tattoos on entertainers and soccer players are blurred on TV, so that their young fans will not think of doing the same (Quackenbush and Chen, 2018; Rick, 2018). The stickers are thus given multiple meanings: First, they are a symbolic tool to vent public anger at the injection of Confucianist norms by the state discourse into personal lives; second, they provide the opportunity to get a tattoo, have fun, wash it off, and go back to their normal life without any real danger, such as getting caught and disciplined at school; third, using the cute Peppa Pig in a tattoo intended to show defiance makes the mockery even more pronounced. Such a tactic of resistance by using the body as a weapon is clever, because it does not create true, lasting confrontation, but it is a measure of how the subculturists are sick and tired of the performative power of the state discourse over the Chinese body. This is illustrated by one interviewee who had used the sticker: “When you use cute things to express rage, it creates something incredibly powerful. When something as harmless as Peppa Pig becomes a symbol of resistance, it’s not difficult to understand that people have had it up to here with this oppressive society. If there were no Peppa Pig, there would be Peppa Cow, Peppa Sheep.”

The Peppa Pig culture has become characteristic of the online resistance that uses the body as a medium. Following the stickers, countless Peppa outfits and

accessories were made and sold to meet the growing demand from Chinese urbanites. At the same time, however, they have not bothered to form any particular offline groups for real-life political causes. One interviewee argues, “People’s love of Peppa Pig is essentially still an act of consumption.” And another told us, “The main reason people like wearing Peppa Pig clothes is that she has a funny shape. She is a pig who looks like a blow dryer.” Seen this way, the Peppa Pig culture differs in nature from the other two discussed in this paper—it is more postmodern and more about emotional catharsis, a tool for its practitioners to tease the Party-state with. In other words, despite the Peppa fans’ disgruntlement with both the Chinese state and the ubiquitous Confucian creeds intruding on every aspect of their life, they are not interested in overthrowing them. This is because they are the beneficiaries of this society in whose stability they have a stake. The first and foremost reason behind their fondness of Peppa Pig lies in their pursuit of an individualized aesthetic pleasure, while political expression has never been their main aim.

None of this, however, prevented the Chinese government from launching a nationwide crackdown on all re-created Peppa Pig works in May 2018. The staunchly pro-government and nationalistic Chinese newspaper *Global Times* warns in its report on the purge that the *shehuiren* label runs counter to mainstream values, a bad influence on the young (Qin, 2018). This confirms what King et al. (2013) describe as the indiscriminate, thus least costly, approach the Chinese censors take in suppressing speech, deleting anything that could lead to activism offline regardless of its content. The arbitrariness of the crackdown also serves as a clear sign that the censorship regime is not cracking up despite the various cultures of resistance challenging it.

The Peppa Pig culture is in many ways the latest variation on the tradition of “limited resistance” by the highly consumerist Chinese megacity dweller in the Internet age. They usually repurpose imported foreign cultural creations by giving them new meanings in the Chinese context, so as to vent their frustration and anger through sarcasm or irony (Chang and Ren, 2016). In a way, this type of “resistance” essentially serves as the safety valve of society. This distinction was sharply drawn by an interviewee: “Peppa Pig cannot be even mentioned next to *moha*. They are vastly different in meaning, significance and definitely value.” This is a clear demonstration of the political resistance of Chinese online subcultures gradually deteriorates under the persistent pressure of state discourse.

## DISCUSSION

This paper adopts the critical discourse analysis in combination with in-depth interviews as it examines the

three representative cases of online cultural resistance among Chinese netizens starting from 2009—the grass mud horse, *moha*, and Peppa Pig. These cases can hopefully help us define the characteristics of the online subcultural resistance in relation to the broader mainstream political culture in China.

To Chinese Internet subculturists, first of all, there is a clear “villain”: the suppression of speech and censorship perpetrated by the Communist Party. The Internet is first and foremost a tool for the subcultural practitioners to sidestep, taunt and even (partially) wreck the censorship regime. This explains the (inevitable) common tactics among these cultures of using prolific linguistic or semiotic weapons to take on the authorities where the rebels revel in the highly contextual and ideographic nature of the Chinese language by creating a copious amount of homonyms and neologisms that contribute to an ever growing pool of online cultural resources that seem harmless or gibberish to the uninitiated. These features of the Chinese language fundamentally shape the form of Chinese online resistance. Major western languages are inflectional, which rely on sentences formed with strict grammatical rules and on established words made up by letters from a finite alphabet. In contrast, Chinese is analytical, its words and phrases composed of characters that number in the thousands. Each character denotes a range of sometimes wildly different meanings, and can only be “pinned down” when it is used in combination with one or more others. As a result, Chinese is highly dependent on context without which there often can be no definitive interpretation. For example, “Tibet” is an established English word that keeps its meaning no matter what situation it is in, but in Chinese, the word is composed of two characters *xi* (西) and *zang* (藏). *Xi* by itself has a relatively stable meaning as “west/western,” while *zang* is a typical polyphonic and polysemic character that can mean either “conceal/hide” or “treasure/storage.” Only when these two characters come together with *xi* before *zang* can the word mean Tibet, an ethnic region in China troubled by a separatist movement. But when *zang* is joined by other characters, different meanings may emerge, such as *guan cang* (馆藏, literally “collections at a library”; the character is pronounced *cang* here). Because of this unique linguistic feature, it is extremely difficult to completely censor a character. The state may want to censor *xi zang* altogether to prevent people from discussing Tibetan independence, but neither *xi* nor *zang* can be scrubbed without wreaking havoc on the language—they are needed to combine with many other characters to function as other words. This creates ample discursive space for the subculturists who have managed to express themselves in a variety of ingenious ways, including abbreviations, hybrids and Latinizations, without raising red flags with the censors. Put in another way, the filters can remove a character or a word but never the contextual meaning behind it. This is why the numerous

campaigns to “clean up the Internet” have never succeeded in eradicating “unwelcome” online language which has survived and prospered on abundant homophony in countless local languages and dialects. This ensures the longevity of these cultures, but as they spread wide, more and more “outsiders” join the ranks of cultural producers and consumers. Unlike the original members, these newcomers display weaker political interests and stronger preferences for personal pleasure, which in the long run will unavoidably deradicalize the resistance, turning it into just another generic pleasure-seeking culture.

Also worth noting is that the disparate strategies of these cultures nevertheless all converge on a deeper level in challenging centuries-old Confucian traditions (beyond merely defying the specific policies and regimes in China today). As mentioned above, after the events of 1989 made the Communist leadership realize that Communism as a “semi-religion” to reaffirm and consolidate the legitimacy of one-party rule no longer worked, they resorted to Confucianism that has a much firmer base historically and culturally among the people and built an entire regime of governance that fuses economic reform and cultural conservatism. Therefore, the anti-Confucian acts and expressions of Chinese subculturists are not only a reaction to their traditional cultural heritage, but also a modern form of political resistance against authoritarianism. The interviewees clearly recognize the state’s manipulation and appropriation of the Confucianist discourse, one of whom said, “I feel there’s a close link between the government crackdown on speech and its aggressive promotion of traditional values... Maybe because freedom of speech is a modern value you can’t openly denounce, so the government must use other means to control it, like admonishing all of us to ‘follow the rules.’” More specifically, the grass mud horse is a deliberate exercise in vulgarity mocking the principles of decorum and order in the Chinese language. *Moha* fans go beyond their station as powerless subjects to attempt to “rewrite” mainstream history. And Peppa Pig rebels symbolically damage their body to scoff at antiquated Confucian dogma. These strategies clearly demonstrate a collective awareness among Chinese Internet users of the Party-state’s manipulation of Confucian ethics to legitimize its repressive policies. As one interviewee put it, “The most powerful word in the grass mud horse culture is actually *hexie* [harmony/river crab]. What is harmony? It’s a crab brandishing its claws and walking sideways, also meaning ‘being a bully’ in Chinese. A society that respects the value of each individual does not need harmony, but freedom.”

Lastly, as untenable as it is to call the three cases “history” in the strict sense, we are able to look back on this past decade and see a gradual decline in online resistance. If, compared with the barbed insolence of the grass mud horse, *moha* is already tame and covert, then

Peppa Pig can at most be charitably described as resistance in name only. This observation deserves a separate paper for a thorough exposition, but it is roughly due to the following reasons. This decade has seen the space of homophony- and neologism-based online resistance increasingly squeezed by the sophisticated filtering technology the Communist Party has developed and the exacting decrees of self-censorship it has issued to Internet companies (Economy 2018). In the meantime, the Chinese government has been actively encouraging the merging of IT corporations, which has resulted in a digital oligarchy that has made it much easier than ten years ago for state-capital collusion, effectively shrinking the virtual space for dissident cultural forms. Broadly speaking, even though China's online subcultures of resistance are incomparable and fascinating (provided that one speaks Chinese and understands the culture), current conditions make them unable or unwilling to exert meaningful influence on the dominant political culture.

Indeed, the interviews have revealed a lack of clear political ideals among the earnest fans of these cultures who have not shown any interest or motivation to form political entities in the real world. They have never developed a firm, coherent political position, or considered toppling the political establishment. Seeking emotional catharsis in specific contexts, the post-subcultural expressions through sarcasm, mockery or parody are quickly produced and disseminated in the window between the birth of a new technology, such as microblogging, collaborative encyclopedia, short video apps, etc., and the development of new filtering tools by the authorities to tame it, and after the purge, they continue to circulate as symbols and images across platforms and gradually deradicalize down to a generic online culture that is only moderately disobedient.

We have also discovered that there is a cynical attitude towards censorship and the Communist rule that drives these subcultural practitioners. The pleasure they derive from producing and consuming online subcultures is certainly political, yet it is a passive-aggressive, even escapist, kind of politics. This nihilistic inclination has given birth to a semiotic guerrilla that crops up here and there and can never be completely stamped out. "A single spark can start a prairie fire," (in the words of Mao Zedong), but more often the "sub" in China's Internet subculture is gradually watered down as more people join in. This may hint at a common pathway of evolution of online subcultures in authoritarian countries, if we can expand our research to include more countries with similar political contexts. Therefore, this research may enrich our understanding of subcultures in the digital age by theorizing the technocracies of the authoritarian political system, and the manners in which subcultural practitioners negotiate with the state censorship through highly contextualized, nonconfrontational tactics. But questions remain. Is this "fate" determined by China's cultural realities? Are there other unknown social factors

at play here? This calls for further academic research.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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### Notes:

- Here are the links to several NYT reports: "A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors," <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html>;
- "Ridicule Turns to Affection as Chinese Social Media Embraces Jiang Zemin" <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20151021/c21sino-jiang/en-us/>;
- "Peppa Pig, Unlikely Rebel Icon, Faces Purge in China," [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/asia/peppa-pig-china-censors.html?\\_ga=2.166175801.602200556.1587713456-258091312.1587351241](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/asia/peppa-pig-china-censors.html?_ga=2.166175801.602200556.1587713456-258091312.1587351241).
- A collaborative online encyclopedia in the likes of Wikipedia but subject to much more stringent censorship. It is owned and run by Baidu, the largest search engine in and has long been a main origin of Internet subcultures in the country.
- Here are the links to the two most popular videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2FI3q5gZnc>.
- The work can be seen here: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ai-weiwei-art-is-like-sex-354203>.
- Both are found in classic Confucian texts. The former is from Chunqiu Guliang Zhuan, and enjoins people to avoid talking about the errors of those above them, and the latter is from *The Analects*, which warns against speaking of (writing about) impropriety. Both principles were sanctioned by Confucius.
- The article can be seen here: [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-07/13/c\\_1124748306.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-07/13/c_1124748306.htm).
- Here is the link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m43UyujVsXk>.
- Although each Chinese character was originally a word in its own right, the modern Chinese language relies heavily on two-character words. The Party's filtering system is set to only screen the word instead of the characters it is composed of. The word moha is banned, but neither mo or ha is, because they, combined with other characters, make up different words. If any single character gets banned, it will wreak havoc on the language and upend day-to-day communication. This unique feature of Chinese is the main reason why it has been so difficult for the Chinese censorship regime to completely purge the Internet.
- Shehui ren, literally "society person," is an Internet buzzword that went viral in 2017-2018. Bearing similar meanings with another word diaosi, it is used by the online youth as self-deprecating humor to announce their status as someone at the bottom of society.

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