

HOW TO BYPASS CENSORS AND GET AROUND THE OPERATORS OF COVER-UPS

Efforts by censors to scrub the internet of Dr. Ai's account of a Coronavirus cover-up have sparked an outpouring of creativity among China's internet users and artists. Many set about crafting ever more eye-popping variations of the interview to fool both human monitors and the software that Chinese social-media sites use to zap sensitive content before it spreads widely. Crowd-sourced public forensics teams have millions of ways to bypass dirty politicians working on cover-ups of political corruption.



1. A barcode version of Ms. Ai's interview created by Mr. Wang, a 46-year-old Beijing-based artist.





2. Another version, by an unknown creator, renders the interview in Mao Zedong's distinctive calligraphy.



3. One version requires users to send a private message with the words "this article" to a public WeChat account. In return, they get a blank document titled "Whistle."



4. ... The text of the interview appears when users click in the white space.

Source: WeChat (screenshots)

One Beijing-based artist said he had posted or reposted around 100 versions of the interview with Dr. Ai, only to see 80% of them deleted. On Wednesday, the 46-year old, who wanted to be identified only by his surname Wang, came up with a version that sandwiched a partial English-language translation between bar codes. Embedded in the image: a plea for China to introduce laws protecting whistle-blowers.

"This is probably the most important thing for the public to pursue," Mr. Wang said, referring to rules that would open the door to freer speech.

Censorship algorithms deployed by Chinese social-media operators are trained to flag sensitive images and text alike. A screenshot of a banned article typically doesn't fool the algorithms. As a result, those looking to evade censors are forced to constantly innovate.

One user rendered the interview in a jaunty handwriting style of late Chinese leader Mao Zedong. It has also been turned into a song and a comicbook strip.

Others got tricky with technology. A public account on China's popular, do-everything app [WeChat](#) required readers to access the interview by sending the words "this essay" in a personal message to administrators. The sender would then receive a link to a blank page with the word "Whistle" at the top. A click in the center of the page would bring up the text of the interview.


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Two men disappeared after their unfiltered video reports questioned China's handling of the coronavirus epidemic. WSJ looks at why non-sanctioned storytelling in China about the crisis flourished online and how the authorities are pushing back. Photo: Isaac Lawrence/AFP via Getty Images

Translation has been one of the most popular workarounds. China's content filters struggle with non-Chinese content, so internet users have busied themselves creating foreign-language versions that others can then copy and put through translation software to convert it back to Chinese.

Aside from conventional spoken languages like Italian and Hebrew, users have posted versions written in Braille, Morse code, emojis and one in sign language. One version claimed to be written in a mixture of Elvish from the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien and Klingon from the TV show “Star Trek.”

Another featured computer code allowing users to download and convert a lightly encrypted version of the interview using a combination of Microsoft Word and Excel.



1. A version of the Ai interview written in Morse code.



2. A version of the interview written in Emojis.



3. A version of the interview rendered in a mix of Elvish and Klingon.



4. A computer code version that outputs the interview as a Microsoft Word document.

Source: WeChat (screenshots)

In recent days, the censorship dodgers have begun describing themselves as taking the baton from the “whistle deliverer.” The term refers to the title of the magazine interview, which was taken from Dr. Ai’s description of her role in warning about the virus.

Though she wasn’t one of the original whistle-blowers, she said, “I’m the one who sent out the whistle.”

Social-media users have applauded efforts to keep the article online.

“I first laughed and then cried when seeing these,” one user posted on WeChat.

The burst of creativity is “a dark comedy caused by an article,” Liao Xinzong, a Taiwan-based writer, wrote on WeChat. He added he hopes new generations “can freely use the Chinese language without any concerns.”

Pushing beyond text, some users inserted the interview into the openings of Hollywood sci-fi films, including the “Matrix” and “Star Wars.”

The [cat-and-mouse game](#) between China's censors and internet users has intensified in recent years as technology has advanced, media researchers say.

The coronavirus has struck a nerve in China because it has affected almost everyone in the country in some way, said King-wa Fu, a censorship expert at the University of Hong Kong. That has inspired a huge surge of protest online.

"This time it's the whole nation," he said. "In scale, it's the largest that I have seen."