KEYWORD: BO XILAI (薄熙来)

A 21-month overview of how events are correlated with blocking of information related to Bo Xilai on Sina Weibo.

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WEB VERSION: https://citizenlab.org/bo_xilai

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ABOUT

新浪微博 weibo.com

Sina Weibo is China's most important social media website, with hundreds of millions of users sharing posts about everything ranging from their favourite pop stars to what they just ate. However, it can also be used to circulate political news and commentary critical of the government, a feature authorities try to restrict in a number of ways, including by blocking the words that people can search for. The inability to search for certain words can be static: for instance, Radio Free Asia (自由亚洲电台) and Falun Gong (法轮功) have been blocked consistently on the site since 2011. However, sometimes words can get unblocked and/or re-blocked, a potential indication of shifting political winds – or simply housecleaning on the part of censors, who may remove previously-filtered keywords from the list once they are deemed no longer sensitive.

Among the most scrutinized keywords is Bo Xilai (薄熙来), the name of the former head of Chongqing, a major city in China. Once earmarked for the highest echelons of leadership in China, Bo was embroiled in various scandals and is now serving a life sentence. In the infographic below, we have collected data from a number of sources, including GreatFire.org, China Digital Times, Blocked on Weibo, and Twitter users to chart the moments when Bo's name became blocked or unblocked on Weibo – speculation being that the authorities blocked his name when online conversations got too unpredictable to control and unblocked it when they sought to give netizens the space to criticize Bo. We've lined up those moments with what was taking place offline at the same time, presenting a connection between how real-life political turmoil was often reflected in changes in censorship online.

LEGEND

BLOCKED
Confirmed as being unsearchable during a test. Indicated in solid red.

PRESUMED BLOCKED
No test performed on this date, but based on other tests, assumed to be blocked. Indicated in translucent red.

UNBLOCKED
Confirmed as returning search results during a test. Indicated by blue/black transparent areas.

PRESUMED UNBLOCKED
No test performed on this date, but based on other tests, assumed to be unblocked. Indicated by light blue/black areas.

UNCERTAIN STATUS
No testing data and unable to presume if blocked or not. Indicated by gray areas.

EVENT
An external event that may have affected weibo search results.

DECEMBER 2011 / JANUARY 2012

2011 / 2012

Dec 29: Many politicians' names are blocked on Weibo, so the blocking of keyword "Bo Xilai" is unremarkable.

Jan 2012: As late as January 2012, Bo was widely viewed as a likely candidate to be promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee, the Chinese Communist Party's (and by extension, China's) highest governing body.

FEBRUARY 2012

Feb 6: Wang Lijun, police chief of Chongqing and a top aide to Bo, secretly visits the American embassy in Chengdu, allegedly seeking asylum in exchange for providing evidence against Bo.

Feb 6-8: Wang Lijun (王立军) is intermittently blocked. It is speculated that the unblocking of his name might be a decision by authorities to damage Bo.

Feb 16: The New York Times reports that despite the widening scandal, Bo might very well survive the damage and that his promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee can't be ruled out.

Feb 21: Rumours circulate online and in Hong Kong media that Bo offered to resign his Politburo seat.

MARCH 2012

March 7: According to reports, the Politburo Standing Committee secretly votes to investigate Bo.

March 8: Bo doesn't appear at the National People's Congress (NPC), fueling speculation that he is on the way out. He later makes a public speech outside NPC chambers, admitting personal failures but also championing his successes and denying rumours that he offered to resign.

March 14: Wen Jiabao remarks at the NPC that China must avoid another "historical tragedy" like the Cultural Revolution, a statement widely seen as criticism of Bo's Mao-style leadership. The unblocking of Bo Xilai just before his removal as Chongqing chief is widely seen as a tacit approval for netizens and media companies to spread criticism of Bo.

March 15: Bo is officially dismissed as party secretary of Chongqing, but temporarily retains his Politburo seat.

March 20: "Coup d'état" (政变) is blocked from searching on Weibo as rumours about an impending overthrow of the Chinese government initiated by the military on behalf of Bo spread throughout Chinese message boards and social media.

March 30: The State Internet Information Office announces that Sina and Tencent Weibo's comments system will be disabled for three days as a punishment for failing to curtail rumours about a Bo Xilai-inspired coup.

APRIL 2012

April 10: Bo is officially removed from his Central Committee and Politburo posts.

MAY 2012

JUNE 2012

Summer, 2012: Over the summer of 2012, more rumours of Bo's improprieties surface, including allegations of wire-tapping other official's phones, womanizing, and plotting to kill Wang Lijun. Stories of how Bo Xilai's wife Gu Kailai was involved with the suspicious death of British national Neil Heywood also circulate.

JULY 2012

July 26: Gu Kailai is officially charged with the murder of Neil Heywood. She admits her guilt and receives a suspended death sentence on August 20.

AUGUST 2012

SEPTEMBER 2012

Sept 24: Wang Lijun is convicted for abuse of power and bribe-taking. He is sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Sept 28: Xinhua reports that Bo is officially expelled from the Chinese Communist Party.

Sept 29: Even though his name is unblocked, keywords which express support for Bo Xilai (支持+薄: "support Bo"; 拥护+薄: "endorse Bo") are still blocked.

OCTOBER 2012

Oct 26: Bo is officially removed from the National People's Congress, his last remaining state post.

NOVEMBER 2012

Nov 4: The Central Committee endorses the removal of Bo from the Chinese Communist Party.

DECEMBER 2012

JANUARY 2013

2013

FEBRUARY 2013

MARCH 2013

March 5 - 17: The National People's Congress meets, the first session without Bo Xilai.

APRIL 2013

MAY 2013

JUNE 2013

JULY 2013

July 25: Bo is officially charged for bribery, abuse of power, and corruption. Though Bo's name is technically now searchable, he is still a sensitive topic. Posts which are too supportive of him (e.g., "Bo is a hero!") or connect Bo's actions to deep-seated Communist Party corruption are often deleted.

See Free Weibo for examples: https://freeweibo.com/en/weibo/薄熙来?censored

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AUGUST 2013

August 26: Bo's trial ends.

SEPTEMBER 2013

September 22: Bo is found guilty of bribery, abuse of power, and corruption, and is issued a life sentence.

October 25, 2013: The Shandong Higher People's Court rejects Bo's final appeal and upholds his conviction.