

# A Privacy Threat for Internet Users in Internet-censoring Countries

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**Abstract:** Online surveillance has been increasingly used by different governments to control the spread of information on the Internet. The magnitude of this activity differs widely and is based primarily on the areas that are deemed, by the state, to be critical. Aside from the use of keywords and the complete domain name filtering technologies, Internet censorship can sometimes even use the total blocking of IP addresses to censor content. Despite the advances, in terms of technology used for Internet censorship, there are also different types of circumvention tools that are available to the general public. In this paper, we report the results of our investigation on how migrants who previously had access to the open Internet behave toward Internet censorship when subjected to it. Four hundred and thirty-two (432) international students took part in the study that lasted two years. We identified the most common circumvention tools that are utilized by the foreign students in China. We investigated the usability of these tools and monitored the way in which they are used. We identified a behaviour-based privacy threat that puts the users of circumvention tools at risk while they live in an Internet-censoring country. We also recommend the use of a user-oriented filtering method, which should be considered as part of the censoring system, as it enhances the performance of the screening process and recognizes the real needs of its users.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, the Internet is being used in different contexts to drive ideas, views and opinions in virtual communities and networks. In January 2011, during the protest against the government in Egypt, the means used for spreading ideologies such as Twitter and Facebook were blocked, and a five-day Internet disruption was reported. Libya also reported instances of Internet disruption after the protests against their government started in February 2011 (Dainotti et al., 2011). Starting in early 2014, Turkey has blocked the IP addresses to Twitter and YouTube after what was judged to be sensitive information by the government had been leaked on these social media platforms. The world has gone virtual, causing the dependence on the Internet to grow rapidly and to an unprecedented level. The pace of adoption of the Internet has only been made faster by people not only being able to read information, but also being able to create and distribute content easily. China, being the most populated country in the world with 1.4 billion people as of 2015, is also first in online presence, with more than 500 million Internet users. To preserve state security along with social and public interest,

Internet security is pressing. The government has used different measures including the Internet censorships in the effort to control the access and publication of any online content judged inappropriate. Many local and international websites that use those social utilities to connect with people (i.e., social networking websites) and web tools that provide access to the world information (i.e., search engines, news, etc.) have been greatly affected by this measure. A complete ban is sometimes used on specific IP ranges when the servers are out of the reach of local authorities' jurisdiction.

Facebook.com has been blocked in Mainland China since July 2008. It had over one billion active users as of October 2012 (Rodriguez, 2013), and this number has not stopped growing. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, although wishing to connect the whole world, finds China extremely complex, and he is taking his time defining the right strategy for dealing with it (Kincaid, 2013). Despite all that, Facebook is still the top most used social website by foreign students in China for catching up with their families and friends living abroad.

After the long effort to awaken China, a once-dormant economic giant (Zuliu and S., 1997), the country is now among the top five world destinations

Table 1: List of the major technologies used by our survey respondents to go through the great firewall.

Tools name	Links*
WebFreer	<a href="http://76.164.202.93/download/WebFreer_1.1.0.0.exe">http://76.164.202.93/download/WebFreer_1.1.0.0.exe</a>
XskyWalker	<a href="http://bbs.0678life.com">http://bbs.0678life.com</a>
GoAgent	<a href="http://code.google.com/p/goagent/">http://code.google.com/p/goagent/</a>
FreeGate	<a href="http://www.dit-inc.us/freegate.html">http://www.dit-inc.us/freegate.html</a>
Psiphon	<a href="https://psiphon.ca/index.html">https://psiphon.ca/index.html</a>
Lantern	<a href="https://getlantern.org/">https://getlantern.org/</a>
Uproxy	<a href="https://www.uproxy.org/">https://www.uproxy.org/</a>
Vtunnel	<a href="http://vtunnel.com/">http://vtunnel.com/</a>
Wallhole1	<a href="http://wallhole1.com">http://wallhole1.com</a>
VPN Book	<a href="http://www.vpnbook.com/webproxy">http://www.vpnbook.com/webproxy</a>
StrongVpn	<a href="http://www.strongvpn.com/">http://www.strongvpn.com/</a>
Astrill	<a href="https://www.astrill.com/">https://www.astrill.com/</a>

\* some of the tools listed above don't have official websites so we have provided the links from where we can download the installation application file.

for businessmen and students. In 2014, an estimated 37,000 international students were granted Chinese scholarships. By 2020, China is expected to host up to 500,000 international students (CSC., 2013). The government is investing ardently in better facilities to make the stay of the international students a pleasant journey (CSC., 2015). But there is a huge gap between the Chinese culture and the cultures of China's neighbouring countries. This difference is greater when it compared with the other countries around the world. Pursuing studies in China is just a different life event for students from outside the Asian continent.

The Internet being a main tool for all of these migrants, they are consistently finding ways for accessing their desired content online. Furthermore, there are numerous free, practical tools (e.g., Freegate, Goagent, Webfreer, X-Walker, etc.) and methods available to bypass the Internet limitation controls. Not wanting to be left without connecting with their friends and loved ones, most international students living in China turn to the use of these free tools.

Although the Internet traffic might often be exposed to potential eavesdroppers; and even though standard encryption mechanisms cannot always provide sufficient protection (Backes et al., 2013), when the human desire predisposes, nothing can stop these users from connecting with those they love. A study by Chellappa et al., in 2005 has shown that users are willing to trade-off their privacy concerns in exchange for benefits such as convenience (Spiekermann et al., 2001); (Chellappa et al., 2005). We assume that most of the time, users of these circumvention tools feel satisfied as long as they are given an easy-to-use (and free) application with

access to blocked online content and moderately fast data transfer. We also assume that few of them actually give considerations to anonymity and privacy risks. Identifying these as weaknesses that could easily be exploited to become threats to their privacy, we have started our research to learn the users' behaviour toward censorship to prove the veracity of our stated assumptions. In our case study, we chose to investigate the way the international students access Facebook from Mainland China, as this is the most used compared to others.

Studies have looked at censorship and Internet filtering in China (Walton, 2001), its specific capabilities (Clayton et al., 2006) and the occurrence of the national filtering (Xu et al., 2011). They are all purely technical, and none has considered the user which is a key player in the whole system. Using a technique that combines surveys, interviews, and investigations of user interactions with the Chinese Internet, we will bring some relevant insights into the way the current circumvention tools are used. During the process, we face several challenges. We need to collect data from a large number of international students in China regarding the way they cope with the Internet censorship and ensure them that their identity won't be unveiled. Second, we must inspect the different tools that are used by these international students, in different cities, allowing us to understand their propagation, their selection, and their usability. The output of this research is of two folds. We learn about the user's choice and acceptance of a given circumvention tool. We identify a weak spot affecting Internet users located in Internet censoring countries. For our implementation, we built an experimental application that provides the open Internet and monitor the users interactivity with it.

This paper does not attempt to offer a description of the tools that work best for students in China; we mainly focus on the availability and the driving force that guides users in accessing different tools. This will be the first study of its kind which attempts to understand the way international students (migrants) use and select different Internet circumvention tools in an Internet censoring country.

The remaining part of this paper is organized as follows: the second section will show the extent of the desire for people to use the uncensored Internet. Section three exposes the international students' strong desire to connect with their friends on Facebook despite Internet censorship. Given all the conditions presented in section two and three, in section four we introduce how an attacker can efficiently access Facebook account information in a simplistic and seamless manner. In section five, we present an overview of our implementation with the results. The last section six is left for the conclusion and discussion.

## 2 DESIRE FOR NETIZEN TO USE UNCENSORED NETWORK

Four years after the Internet connectivity was officially established in 1994 in China (Yang, 2003), the Golden Shield Project also known as the Great Firewall of China (GFC) started and began processing in 2003. It is a digital surveillance and censorship network operated by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security. In its early stage, the system in place for the digital surveillance was not able to filter secure traffic (Walton, 2001) Virtual private network (VPN), secure shell (SSH), and tunneling protocols were among the most efficient methods for circumventing the GFC. Late in 2012, many companies providing virtual private network services to users in China stated that the Great Firewall has become able to learn, discover and block the encrypted communications. Some have noted that the Internet service providers kill connections where a VPN is detected (Guardian., 2011). Such, again proved that the computing environment changes so much and trying to stay ahead of Internet censorship is a cat and mouse game.

Nowadays, many individuals and organizations are joining forces and standing for a single open Internet. One of the largest network promoting open and anonymous Internet is Tor, available at [torproject.org](http://torproject.org) (Danezis, 2011). Since the release of the Tor Browser application to the general public, its

number of users has not stopped growing. But although Tor should be working in China (Arma, 2014), during our testing in different locations within two years, it never worked for us.

Goagent (<https://github.com/goagent/goagent>) is another network circumvention software that is open source and supports multiple operating systems. Goagent was almost always working during our two-year monitoring and testing. It is also very well accepted by Chinese Internet users. Its only weak point is the installation phase, which requires tinkering that most potential users would just give up after engaging in the first few steps.

Freerate (<http://dit-inc.us/freerate.html>) is another well-reputed circumvention tool used by the Chinese netizens. The software is very easy to use and is among the ones that worked in circumventing the GFC.

Webfreer and XskyWalker are two software browsers that also circumvent the GFC and are well adopted by students. Both applications require to be installed and were only available for Windows operating systems. Now, the XskyWalker has been ported to Android and is also getting much appreciation from the users.

The list of the free circumvention tools that can be used in China does not stop there but these are the ones that we choose to investigate, as they were what most international students were using on their computers during the time of our investigations. A list of the ten most used circumvention tools by the international students studying in China is presented in Table 1. 97% of our participants in the survey introduced in the next section have been at least using one of these circumvention tools during their stay in China, a flagrant evidence for their needs of an open Internet.

## 3 NETIZEN EAGER TO USE FACEBOOK

Since the date Facebook could not be accessed freely within Mainland China, a significant number of local social networking websites have seen their genesis within the local market. Despite this restriction, many are still able to access and maintain their Facebook accounts. What circumvention tools do they use? How do they get hold on those tools? We take the first step in answering the above questions. We initiate a survey followed by an interview. We have approached 432 international students, with at least a high school degree, aged between 18 to 35, and all

studying for at least one semester in China. We went door to door to make sure that each respondent is an international student. The sample was mixed in gender and had representatives of people from all different continents. They were physically located in different universities and provinces in China. All participants were answering the questionnaire followed with an interview to determine their behaviour toward censorship. Because of the ever-changing context of the Internet censorship condition, we have had two series of surveys followed by interviews within two years. Upon completion of the surveys, a list of the most used circumvention tools has emerged (Table 1).

In the meantime, in order to have a real knowledge of the international students use of the Internet while pursuing their studies in China, we have contacted some foreign students and 20 allowed us to retrieve their browsing histories for the last 200 days. These students were not informed prior our data extraction in order to not influence their normal daily online activities and allow them to delete some privately visited content. This is one of the main reasons why it was hard for us to retrieve more data from more users. We have cleaned and analysed the data, but because of page limitation we just provide an histogram of our respondents accessed websites organized by category in figure 2 and the partitioning of use of messaging systems used in figure 3. The messaging system and social networking services are the most accessed content by the international students and Facebook takes the first place.

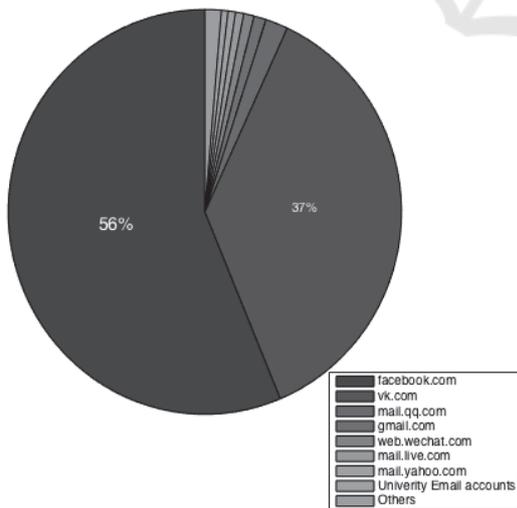


Figure 2: Percentage of the online content accessed by the international students in China organized by categories.

After a further analysis of the data we have collected, we could identify that up to 95% of our

respondents who already used Facebook in their home countries are still able to access and maintain their Facebook accounts while in China. Those students use diverse tools to access Facebook and other censored websites.

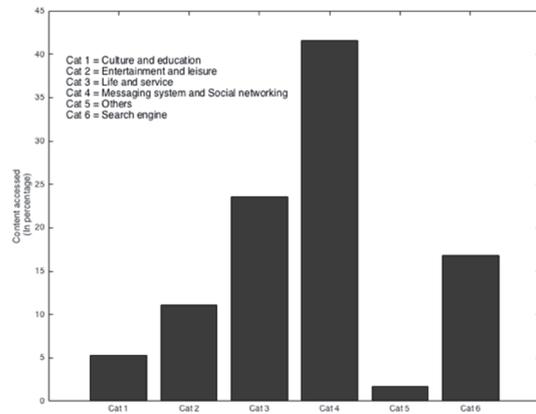


Figure 3: A report of the messaging system and social networking websites use by the foreign students in China.

We have grouped the used circumvention technologies in two categories: paid and free tools. 98% of our survey respondents that are Facebook users are using free applications and services to get around the censorship. The data has also shown that the international students in China have a preference for using applications that are run or installed on their operating systems compared to web-based services such as www.vtunnel.com. This is mainly because almost all the websites that provide information and circumvention services are blocked in China. Those who were responding to our survey, were relying on tools that they downloaded before entering the country or tools that their friends in the same situation are using.

Apart from the application being free, the international students' choice when selecting a circumvention tool is made based on what tools are available, their user friendliness, their efficiency in connecting to the world Internet, and last but not least, their connection speed. These are the main requirements of our respondents when selecting the tools to use, and not even one was pertinent to security. We consider such behaviour from these international students to be exposing themselves to potential threats toward their online information.

#### 4 HOW AN ATTACKER CAN EASILY ACCESS FACEBOOK ACCOUNT INFORMATION FROM A SEAMLESS MANNER

As the number of Facebook users does not stop increasing, so does the amount of users' personal private data available in these networks. This social networking platform has become another target of high interest for attackers to collect data and to engage in nefarious activities. In this paper, we present how an attacker can exploit and access users' Facebook account based on countries where it is censored. As mentioned earlier, we could know that the international students are more likely to connect on Facebook and pass through the great firewall of China using free tools and services. They only have three main requirements apart from the service being free which are availability, efficiency (speed and connection reliability), and the tools' user-friendliness.

We have tested all the application-circumvention tools listed in the table 1 and calculated the latency in loading each of the 20 top websites in table 2. We discovered that the acceptable connection speed for a tool that can bypass the GFC and be able to maintain its reputation while keeping users using it starts from a modest speed of 0.41 Mbps. Among the tested tools, none could ensure uninterrupted connection to the world Internet. The applications which are able to relay to the Internet with the minimum disconnection interruptions and able to maintain a moderate speed are the most used. The international students are also selective for the applications that are easy in manipulation and quick to setup during installations phase.

Table 2: List of the top 20 sites (from alexia.com, early 2015).

N.	URLs	N.	URLs
#1	google.com	#11	google.co.in
#2	facebook.com	#12	linkedin.com
#3	youtube.com	#13	live.com
#4	baidu.com	#14	sina.com.cn
#5	yahoo.com	#15	weibo.com
#6	wikipedia.org	#16	yahoo.co.jp
#7	amazon.com	#17	tmall.com
#8	twitter.com	#18	google.co.jp
#9	taobao.com	#19	google.de
#10	qq.com	#20	ebay.com

When a user first accesses his Facebook account through a proxy or when a login is done from an uncommon location, the Facebook system might ask him to go through some test verifications to prove account ownership. Once the user passes the test and is granted access to his account, the next time the same account logs in from the same IP address (considering that the accounts are set with Facebook's default security settings), it is unlikely that Facebook will ask the user to prove again account ownership.

Based on that, the user's trust in tools can now be an attacker's weapon. An attacker can setup up a server, make client software to be run on the targeted users' computers, and publish to make it available to them. The client software will set and define the connection between the user and the server that not only provides the open internet but also collects whatever data that might be of value to the attacker. In such a condition, the attacker could already use deep packet inspection to monitor the traffic and collect log reports (Mahmood, 2012). In further crafting the client application, the attacker could get access to the login and password. This method is still effective when the user uses HTTPS during log in because the client application could be set to extract the credentials before they get encrypted (figure 4).

```
public void btn_action(View view) {
    //Get user credentials
    String user_login = et_login.getText().toString();
    String user_password = et_pass.getText().toString();
    //Retrieve the credentials
    SendToServer(user_login, user_password);
    //Todo: Do what needs to be done with the credentials
}
```

Figure 4: Snippet for retrieving the credentials in Freer.

Despite Facebook's efforts in maintaining a safe and trusted environment (Facebook, 2013), such a security threat is still hard to breakdown as it is entirely the user's attitude and behaviour that exposes full control of the communication channel to the attacker.

With the raise in use of smartphones, an attacker could also target mobile devices. Moreover, the threat is even ardent when the official applications for those devices don't work and an attacker is able to provide alternatives. Taking the case of Facebook, without an official Facebook application that works in countries censoring the Internet like China. Thus an attacker can simply craft an application that provides access to Facebook while gathering users' data and make that application available to those in need.

## 5 IMPLEMENTATION

With the tendency for youth to access their Facebook account through mobile devices and with the restrictions that affect Facebook users in China, they won't be able: to see what their friends are up to, to share updates including photos and videos, to get notified when friends are liking or commenting on any of their previous posts, and to chat and engage into group conversations within their networks. That is a big handicap, and most of those who are already on Facebook before entering such an internet censored condition, instead of coping with the situation will happily use any alternative applications that will allow them to join the social network back especially when there are free solutions. They would adopt any available solutions, which are efficient enough for what they claim to provide and even better if they are user-friendly.

Aware of such users' tendency, an attacker, can exploit and craft a malicious proxy that provides Facebook access to those living in Internet-censoring countries. In the surveys we run, we could produce a non-exhaustive list of the circumventions tools (Table 1) used by the respondents who are all international students in China. We have investigated these tools especially in term of usability and we have studied how people interact with these technologies. We consider the following as good tasks for analyzing the usability of each tool of these tools: installation process, accessing a Facebook page, viewing some photo-albums on Facebook. Our measures are learnability, connection speed, user preference, memorability and efficiency.

XSkyWalker and WebFreer took the lead in the analysis results due to their ease of installation and intuitive user interfaces very similar to the well reputed web browser Google Chrome. XSkyWalker was favoured as results of its clean look without disruptive ads and the auto switch between the connection to the local internet and the world internet based on connection restrictions.

To simulate a malicious proxy, we developed Freer, an application for Android devices focused on user needs and context. Freer is a user-oriented application, and its first installation settings have been reduced to the minimum. For the implementation, we:

- a. Setup a proxy channel (this part is not covered in this paper).
- b. Make an Android application that mimics the mobile version of the Facebook homepage, visible at <https://m.facebook.com>

- c. Add the scripts that extract the login and password, prior to authentication of the user on the Facebook server.

To prove that retrieving user information based on the condition mentioned earlier is very easy to achieve, we intentionally chose to use a simple webView (an android view) for implementing Freer. To see its efficiency, we made the application accessible for downloading to our 50 volunteers.

With a Facebook user account set with the default security settings, at this stage Freer is working perfectly. However, Facebook has different security settings available to the users that are: Secure Browsing, Login Notifications, Login Approvals, Code Generator, App Passwords, Trusted Contacts and Recognized device. Some of these security features, if activated, can limit the efficiency of the Freer application.

Knowing that the user does not have other free, effective and official alternatives for accessing what they need, we have updated Freer to ask explicitly for the users' cooperation for the well functioning of the application. For all users that are using Freer and have Login Approvals activated, we set Freer to request them explicitly to deactivate this security setting to leverage its full power. In practice, as soon as we detect that the user account has Login Approvals activated if the user persists in using Freer without changing this setting, we will tease him by partially loading the content and then showing an error requesting full permission to access the account. With no official Facebook application that can bypass the Great Firewall of China and give Facebook users' connection to their loved ones, those who took part in our experiments willingly disabled the Login Approvals from their accounts.

Our approach is not focused on a technical way to breach the security in place. Here we intend to prove that the users are willing to get passed all these security steps to get what they want.

To play on the users' emotion and tease them, we find it most efficient to allow them to access all Facebook content smoothly and freely within the first few minutes of use of Freer. If any of the two previously mentioned security settings is enabled, then Freer will start displaying the warning requesting the user to disable the optional security settings. Moreover, those who are using Android and are residing in China have been slowly cultivated to get past security warnings because each time they have to install an application on their device, they always need to "allow installation of apps from unknown sources" for side loading.

## 6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

User privacy is vital in online services, but it is hard to defend against some attacks when the user is voluntarily contributing to the breach of security as presented in the above sections. Leakage of personal information has often slandered people's reputation and many times invited spamming, stalking and other malicious attacks. This degree is rising when it gets to online social networks as the friends' information of a corrupted account is also getting exposed to the attacker.

In this paper, we have shown that it is easy to lure users to install and use a malicious proxy application to access Facebook in China. However, such a scenario can be broadened to a general case where people are using free and closed source circumvention application to access restricted information from the Internet.

From 2009 onwards, despite being the most used social networking website used by foreigners for connecting to the rest of the world, Facebook has been banned in China. This situation forces users to be somehow active in finding circumvention methods and often put their privacy at risk. In our implementation of Freer, we have shown that only the least technical skill is needed to breach security features offered to the users and that they even voluntarily contribute to the well functioning of the application as long as it helps them get what they need. Freer has been intentionally designed in a simplistic way to show that breaching the security of the system could be achieved mainly with the help of the users.

There are many entities trying to fight to connect the world through the Internet. International corporations should not minimize the presented threat that users living in Internet censoring-countries are facing. Efficient counteroffensive should be taken into account, and further research in such orientation should supplement this work.

Each coin has two sides and so, in our proposal for solutions we provide three folds:

First, the corporations and entities that have their contents restricted should support some of the ongoing projects on providing free circumvention tools. Also, they should support these projects in terms of branding and awareness. In doing, the users in need of these resources will at least be sure that they are using official and trustworthy applications.

Second, the organizations or entities that are developing the circumvention techniques should focus more on providing user-friendly tools. We

could discover from our investigation that although GoAgent is working well in China, many of the potential users were reluctant to use it because of the complexity of the first setup. XskyWalker in the other hand, although using the same architecture, has attracted more users mainly because of its simple installation procedure.

Third, national situations and cultural traditions differ among countries, and so apprehension about Internet security also differs. Concerns about Internet security of different countries should be fully respected (Han, P., 2010). In search of a secure common ground for cyberspace for peace while promoting development through exchanges, Internet users should be part of the security and should be considered part of the system. If provided something that will not help them in achieving their tasks, people will always be constrained to find alternative solutions, which might compete, and breach the security put in place. Moreover, some third-part can take advantage of the situation for running his exploits. So, when building a security system, the following should be addressed: What do the users need to do? How often do the users need to do that? What do you need to tell the users so that they will make that decision? Addressing the case study, we have considered in this paper, because the international students mostly always find ways for circumventing the GFC. It would be more efficient and exploitable in term of surveillance and monitoring to provide an openly monitored channel to the international students. Such a channel will allow these users to access the content they need and at the same time will enable a better surveillance of the network traffic.

To sum up, like great constructions designed for the good of mankind, whether surveillance or circumvention, tools should be designed based on the users need and context. The complexity of a given security measure that only considers the technological side of the system and fails to consider the users during the design is breaking the weakest link in the security chain.

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