

The Internet in China: Information Revolution or Authoritarian Solution?



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1) Introduction

“In the new century liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem... We know how much the Internet has changed America, and we are already an open society. Imagine how much it could change China. Now, there’s no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet –good luck. That’s sort of like trying to nail Jello [sic] to the wall.”

*William J. Clinton, 8th March 2000.*¹

“...你好，您的站点内容有关言论违反了现行国家法律和政策[。] 请尽快和我们联系。

...How are you, your website has content that violates the current national law, regulations and policy [.] please contact us as soon as possible.”

from <http://aweek.top263.net> (no longer in existence)
Last visited by Lokman Tsui on 17 June 2001.²

The Internet, since it made the transition from military and academic experiment to mainstream global communications network, has been viewed by Western politicians and journalists alike as a kind of catalyst for freedom, justice and democracy. It is seen as a medium that will instinctively seek to undermine, and perhaps, overthrow authoritarian regimes while simultaneously espousing democratic ideals and bringing the type of representative government of North America and Europe to the rest of the world. While many countries have restricted Internet access to varying degrees (e.g., Cuba only allows Internet access from approved institutions³ while Internet access was completely prohibited in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan⁴) the Chinese government has actively encouraged and invested in the growth of the Internet. The

¹ Drake, Kalathil & Boas, (2000), “Dictatorships in the Digital Age: Some Considerations on the Internet in China and Cuba”, *iMP Magazine* (Center for Information Strategy and Policy), October 2000, (http://www.cisp.org/imp/october_2000/10_00drake.htm).

² The website no longer exists – taken from Lokman Tsui, (2001), “Internet in China: Big Brother is Watching You”. *Chinese Languages & Culture*. Amstelveen, University of Leiden., Appendix 6, p63.

³ Drake, Kalathil & Boas, “Dictatorships in the Digital Age”, p11 of 18.

⁴ R. Frank Lebowitz, (2001), “Taliban Ban Internet in Afghanistan”, *Digital Freedom Network*, 16th July 2001, (<http://dfn.org/focus/afghanistan/Internetban.htm>).

restrictions it imposes, both virtual and physical, have been seen as mere inconveniences which both the technology and determination of the people will ultimately circumvent. It is only recently that certain academics have begun to doubt this sanguine opinion and, while not dismissing it entirely, view it as a 'leap of faith'.⁵ There are a number of articles dealing with the subject, and there has been one interesting dissertation that I have found on the subject (Lokman Tsui, (2001), "Internet in China: Big Brother is Watching You". Chinese Languages & Culture. Amstelveen, University of Leiden.). However, because it is such a new topic there are no academic books available. The only book that I could find was by David Sheff (David Sheff, (2002). China Dawn: The Story of a Technology and Business Revolution, New York, Harper Collins Inc.) which was a look at the business side of the Internet in China and hardly dealt with politics at all.

This dissertation will firstly look at the attitude of Western libertarians and will present the arguments put forward in support of the idea that the Internet can bring freedom and democracy to China. Then I shall examine how technological controls, fear of suppression, political apathy and foreign investment will prevent this from happening.

⁵ Drake, Kalthil & Boas, "Dictatorships in the Digital Age", p2 of 18.

2) *The Internet as a harbinger of democracy*

起虎难下

“Once you get on the back of a tiger it’s difficult to dismount.”⁶

The Conjecture

The Internet arrived in China in 1996 on a rather small scale but has grown exponentially ever since and continues to do so. The government has been walking an uncertain path between promotion and restriction, between investment and clamp-down and between encouragement and deterrence. From the establishment in 1997 of a China-only ‘Intranet’ (later quietly abandoned)⁷ to the present policy of physically blocking certain foreign and inflammatory websites, whilst overwhelming Chinese Internet users with a bombardment of approved material created within the country, the Chinese government has been actively seeking to control the use of this exciting new medium. In addition the government continues to produce legislation to prevent the Internet from being used for un-approved purposes and will not hesitate to prosecute those who dare to deviate from its permitted uses. Nonetheless these controls are arguably ineffective; John Gilmore of Electronic Frontier Foundation once said “The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it.”⁸ It was designed by the U.S. military to survive a nuclear war. Lokman Tsui explains that “the internet is a packet-switched network, meaning it is designed so that data are [sic] sent around in small packets and are able to take another route if one part of the

⁶ A Chinese idiom or chengyu (成语) repeated by Orville Schell (China scholar and dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley). Taken from David Sheff, (2002). *China Dawn: The Story of a Technology and Business Revolution*, New York, Harper Collins Inc., p10.

⁷ Terry McCarthy, (2000), “China Dot Now” *Time Asia*. 155, 28th February 2000. (<http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/2000/0228/cover1.html>).

⁸ This is a quote attributed to John Gilmore of Electronic Frontier Foundation. He cannot remember when or where he said it but he too believes that he did once say it. For more information visit <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/people/reagle/inet-quotations-19990709.html>.

network is down. Censorship is thus treated as if one part of the network is down. The internet will find a way around the censorship to reach its target.”⁹ There are ways to get around these obstructions and this is what Clinton and others base their conjecture on.

The Evidence

Proxy Servers

All computers, including those that host websites, can be identified by a unique code called an Internet Protocol (IP) address. These are the addresses that are accessed when a browser visits a website. A ‘www’ address is simply a front for an IP address, used because words are easier to remember than numbers. For example the IP address for the University of Leeds (www.leeds.ac.uk) is ‘129.11.5.57’. If that were typed into a browser’s address bar the same site would be accessed. The Chinese government prevents access to certain websites by blocking certain IP addresses through a national ‘firewall’ (A firewall is a system or group of systems that enforces an access control policy between two networks¹⁰). However, breaking through the firewall is theoretically a simple task. It can be done by using what is known as a proxy server - “another computer that acts as an intermediary between surfers and websites, helping to hide their web footprints and evade the filters.”¹¹ A Study in 2000 by researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences revealed that from 1037 people surveyed “more than a quarter of Internet users admitted to occasionally using Internet proxy computers...while 10 percent admitted to frequent use.”¹² In Internet

⁹ Lokman Tsui, *Internet in China: Big Mama is Watching You*, p10.

¹⁰ see <http://www.interhack.net/pubs/fwfaq/#SECTION00031000000000000000>

¹¹ Ethan Gutmann, (2002), “Who Lost China’s Internet?”, *The Weekly Standard*, Washington D.C., 25th February 2002.

¹² Jennifer Lee, (2001), “United States Backs Plan to Help Chinese Evade Government Censorship of Web”, *New York Times*, New York, August 30th 2001.

Original statistics in Chinese are as follows: (see footnotes on next page)

Explorer or Netscape Navigator it is simple for the initiated to enter the address of a proxy server. Ethan Gutmann comments that the “most common search words in China were... ‘free’ and ‘proxy’”¹³ Nina Hachigian points out that “In 1999, a Chinese newspaper’s report on how to use proxy servers for ‘faster’ connections taught readers how to reach banned material.”¹⁴ Through the use of proxy servers many people in China were able to read the text of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian’s inaugural address despite the fact that it did not appear in any of the official publications.¹⁵

However it must be pointed out that, like addresses of websites, the IP addresses of proxy servers can also be blocked. The ‘proxy surfers’ rely on the fact that new proxy servers appear every day and on the assumption that the government could not possibly block them all. An American company called Safeweb, which operates a global network of proxy servers, is helping to assist Internet users in China to outwit the government. The U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau, the parent of ‘Voice of America’, has been having discussions with Safeweb who have incidentally been given funding by In-Q-Tel, the venture capital sector of the Central Intelligence Agency.¹⁶ The proxy server system they have developed is called ‘Triangle Boy’ and as Gutmann points out “the triangle refers to the Chinese user, to a fleet of servers outside of the firewall, and to a mothership [sic] which the servers report to, but the

“调查还发现，经常使用代理服务器的用户 9.8%，偶尔使用 25.5%，不使用代理服务器的 37.9%，不知道代理服务器的 21.0%。不愿回答此题 5.8%（N=1037）。可见，中国用户使用或知道代理服务器的比例相当高。” See the statistics posted by Guo Liang (郭良) and Bu Wei (卜卫) at <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/text5.htm> (see <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/> for the full survey).

¹³ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

¹⁴ Nina Hachigian, (2001), “China’s Cyber Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 80, March/April 2001 (available at <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/capp/cyberstrategy.html>).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Jennifer Lee, “United States Backs Plan to Help Chinese Evade Government Censorship of Web”.

Chinese government cannot find.”¹⁷ The addresses of the servers change daily and are sent out by e-mail to those that use them; in theory they could change every hour.

E-mail

Perhaps the most common use of the Internet is electronic mailing. This allows information to be sent over the internet from user to user or perhaps more importantly from one user to numerous users at speeds unimaginable in the past. Nina Hachigian remarks that “e-mails can replace dangerous personal meetings among dissenters. Furthermore, the instant dissemination of information about a political event to thousands of people can build momentum behind a cause faster than past media ever could.”¹⁸ While the blocking of objectionable websites might be a relatively simple task, censorship of e-mail is a considerably more difficult undertaking to accomplish. Although the Chinese government has made significant attempts to censor e-mail sent to e-mail addresses in China there is an obvious way to get around this censorship. Signing up for one of the many web-based non-Chinese e-mail providers such as Hotmail (www.hotmail.com), which is incidentally now available in Simplified Chinese characters, is a simple way to get around the potential problems. The Chinese government cannot feasibly block websites like Hotmail because companies like Microsoft (owner of Hotmail) form a powerful lobby whose support China requires in order to expand its rapidly growing Information Technology (IT) sector.

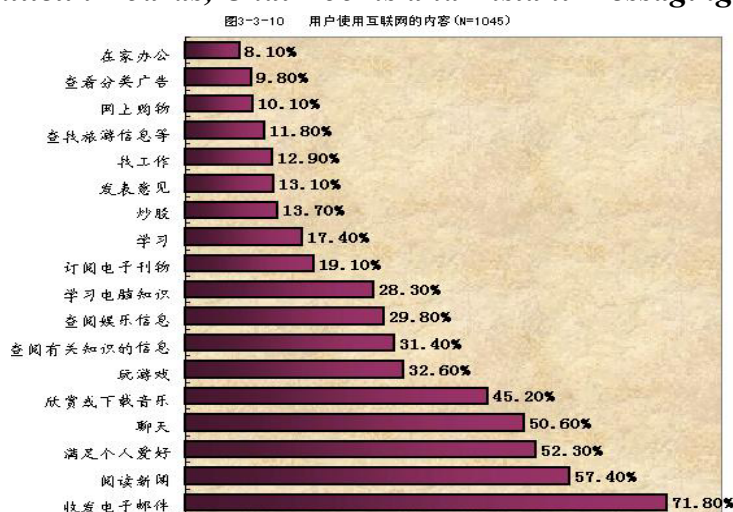
E-mail is the ‘weapon of choice’ for ‘wired’ Chinese dissidents. Despite the blocking of Falun Gong websites hosted overseas, e-mail has been become a lifeline for practitioners organising meetings and protests. Likewise underground dissident magazines such as VIP Reference and Tunnel (both discussed later) use e-mail to

¹⁷ Ethan Guttman, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

¹⁸ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

disseminate their regular issues to Internet users in China.¹⁹ Nina Hachigian explains that “e-mail was critical to the growth of the now-outlawed China Democracy Party.”²⁰ Even veteran Chinese dissident Dai Qing admitted to Geremie Barne and Sang Ye “whenever I get back to my apartment, the first thing I do is check my e-mail”.²¹

IRC, Bulletin Boards, Chat Rooms and Instant Messaging Clients



*Internet Usage Statistics from 2000 'Survey on Internet Usage and Impact' from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.*²²

There are a number of different ways of communicating over the Internet. IRC (Internet Relay Chat)²³, Chat Rooms²⁴ (mostly hosted on web-portals such as Yahoo, MSN, or in China Sohu, Netease, and Sina but also available as downloadable clients), and Instant messaging clients (Yahoo²⁵, MSN²⁶ and ICQ²⁷ or the Chinese OICQ²⁸) allow the instantaneous exchange of messages between users. Using a chat room one is able to have a conversation with the other users in the chat room in real-time. Chat

¹⁹ VIP Reference (大参考) can be found at <http://www.bignews.org>

Tunnel (隧道) can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Bay/5598/>.

²⁰ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

²¹ Geremie R. Barne & Sang Ye (1997), “The Great Firewall of China”, *Wired Magazine*, (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.06/china_pr.html).

²² See <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/text5.htm> (<http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/> for the full survey).

²³ See <http://www.cnet.com/Resources/Info/Glossary/Terms/irc.html> for more details.

²⁴ See <http://www.cnet.com/Resources/Info/Glossary/Terms/chat.html> for more details.

²⁵ See <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>

²⁶ See <http://messenger.msn.com/>

²⁷ See <http://web.icq.com/>

²⁸ See <http://www.tencent.com/>

is one of the favourite pastimes of Chinese Internet users. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' 2000 'Survey on Internet Usage and Impact' revealed that 50.6% of people interviewed use the Internet for 'chat' (see above graph).

Bulletin boards, hosted on websites or available through Usenet²⁹ news groups, allow people to post messages and reply to messages posted by other users. Like chat rooms, Bulletin boards have taken China by storm and despite restrictions they are being used to criticize the government and to discuss politics. Fred Moody points out that "in classic subversion fashion, the students tend to post their opinions on bulletin boards with innocuous subject headings, like Mathematics or Physics, where administrators are unlikely to go looking for objectionable content."³⁰ Hachigian mentions that "even excerpts from The Tiananmen Papers³¹ ...were posted on on-line bulletin boards and discussed in chat rooms in China within days...of their release in the United States."³²

Dissident Publications

Chinese News Digest 中华新闻电脑网络 (www.cnd.org), VIP Reference 大参考 (www.bignews.org), Tunnel 隧道(<http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Bay/5598>) and a number of other publications are blocked from within mainland China. However they can be reached through proxy servers.

CND provides China-related news coverage for Westerners and Chinese communities around the world. In addition to news, discussion forums and an extensive archive library it also provides information about proxy servers and is itself hosted on a number of proxy servers around the world.

²⁹ See <http://www.cnet.com/Resources/Info/Glossary/Terms/usenet.html> for more details.

³⁰ Fred Moody, (1999), "Let 1,000 Web Sites Bloom", ABCNEWS.com, (<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/FredMoody/moody990202.html>).

³¹ The Tiananmen Papers is book of edited documents detailing the debate among China's leaders in the run up to the Tiananmen Massacre.

Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link (eds), *The Tiananmen Papers*, Abacus, London, 2002. (first published in the U.S. by PublicAffairs in 2001).

³² Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber Strategy".

Both VIP Reference and Tunnel circumvent Chinese government censorship by e-mailing readers. VIP Reference was setup by Overseas Chinese dissidents wishing to circulate information and articles critical of the Chinese government to Overseas Chinese and Chinese people living in China. It also posts on a number of China related bulletin boards and newsgroups. A visit to ‘soc.culture.china’, ‘soc.culture.taiwan’, or ‘talk.politics.china’ from a News-reader³³ will reveal numerous posts originating from VIP Reference.

Tunnel Magazine was started by dissidents inside China. The magazine is written, encrypted and then e-mailed to the United States where it is e-mailed back to thousands of Chinese e-mail addresses.³⁴ Readers are asked to provide more e-mail addresses for the Tunnel mailing list and, as it is distributed without being requested, if a copy is found on somebody’s computer they can quite reasonably argue that they didn’t request it. Some of the contributors were arrested in July 1998 in Jiangxi Province³⁵ but new issues continue to be published. The latest issue (186) is dated 13th April 2002³⁶.

The growth of a Civil Society and of Government Accountability

“As the number of Internet users grows, we expect the medium will become an increasingly important tool in fostering the development of civil society in China.”

*From a report by the United States Embassy, Beijing, March 2001.*³⁷

There is a lot to be said for the proposal that the Internet can help to cultivate a Civil Society in China and improve government accountability and there are many

³³ Usenet newsgroups can be accessed through Microsoft Outlook Express or a third-party News-reader client.

³⁴ Bryan Pfaffenberger, (2000), “The Internet in China”, *Linux Journal*, (<http://www.linuxjournal.com/article.php?sid=5064>), November 22nd 2000.

³⁵ Jim Erickson, (1998) “Blocking and Tackling: Is China cracking down on Internet activists?”, *Asiaweek* (<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/98/0814/feat1.html>).

³⁶ Issue 186 of Tunnel Magazine is available at <http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Bay/5598/02/sd0204a.txt>

³⁷ U.S. Embassy Beijing, (2001), “Kids, Cadres And ‘Cultists’ All Love It: Growing Influence Of The Internet In China”, (<http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/english/sandt/netoverview.html>) March 2001.

examples of how it has already had this effect. Despite government restrictions the Internet (along with MTV, soaps from Taiwan and Hong Kong, Hollywood films and Western musical influences) has certainly had a limited pluralizing effect on China. In the country where telephone numbers of Government departments used to be a state secret a massive project has been underway for several years now to put all national and local government departments on-line. By May 1999 there were already 1,470 sub-domain names registered under the ‘.gov.cn’ domain.³⁸

The Internet also has the power to enhance government accountability through on-line discussions and the spread of information. Public opinion has already embarrassed the government into compromise. When an explosion killed 42 school children in March 2001 Zhu Rongji and the state media accredited the explosion to a bomb started by a menace. However the story that children had been forced to make fireworks was broken by several on-line newspapers. Zhu had to apologize “for allowing the abuses that led to the accident [and]...the internet served as a catalyst of public opinion and led to greater government accountability.”³⁹

It is increased government accountability and the growth of a civil society that Western observers hope and predict will, through the use of proxy servers, e-mail, chat rooms, and daring dissident activity, overwhelm the Chinese government’s control of the medium and bring Western-style democracy to China.

³⁸ Dali L. Yang, (2001), “The Great Net of China”, Harvard International Review **22**(4): 64-69.

³⁹ “Speaking Out: The Internet in China” (2001) , Harvard International Review, **23**(4): 7-8.

3) A tool of suppression, control and surveillance

“It’s possible to imagine a scenario in which the Net, rather than promoting freedom and openness, is used for propaganda and surveillance, a tool of a sort of technonationalism [sic].”

David Sheff (author of China Dawn: The Story of Technology and Business Revolution)⁴⁰

Technology and Censorship

Science and technology has always played an important role in the building of Chinese Nationalism from the time of the ‘Qing Restoration’ of the 1860s “when some modern arsenals were set up and textbooks in technology translated. Western science became more relevant to Chinese nationalism during the ‘Self Strengthening Movement’ that followed. It was assumed that the foreigners’ domination of China was based on the superiority of their weapons and that the only way to drive them out would be to learn how to make and use Western machinery so that they would be competing on an equal footing.”⁴¹ From the 1860s until the present day China has tried to use technology to strengthen herself while carefully attempting to prevent it from damaging the fabric of her society, whether Confucian or Marxist. Once again China views technology as the key to her progress and believes that, amongst other technologies, the Internet is a vital factor in her transformation from developing country to superpower. The government is aware of the ‘harmful’ effects of this new technology and is not prepared to sit back and allow it to develop naturally. As Bai Jinghong, manager of one of the ‘Sparkice’ Internet cafés in Beijing, told Geremie

⁴⁰ David Sheff, “China Dawn”, p107.

⁴¹ Gregory Sinclair, “Do Falun Gong’s origins in popular religious tradition provide an alternative definition of ‘Chineseness’ which threatens the Communist Party’s present construction of nationalism?” (Nationalism & Ethnicity in China - EAST2580), Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, May 2001.

Barme and Sang Ye, “to censor harmful things doesn’t just ensure that the Internet can develop in a healthy fashion; it will also ensure stability for China.”⁴²

The Great Firewall of China

*title of an article by Geremie R. Barme and Sang Ye.*⁴³

The Chinese government’s principal method of controlling the Internet is through the blocking of certain websites’ IP addresses, through a national firewall. As mentioned before, users can circumvent this firewall by using a proxy server address. It is not difficult to imagine that the government would do everything it could to block these proxy server addresses as well as the ‘spiritually polluting’ websites. While it is true that proxy servers appear every day and it is difficult to discover them before people use them, this has not stopped the government from making increasingly intelligent attempts to control the ‘uncontrollable’ nor from investing substantially in hardware and software that can help them to do this. For example, they have paid “the networking superpower, Cisco, to standardize the Chinese Internet and equip it with firewalls on a national scale.”⁴⁴ Gutmann points out that a campaign has begun to block these proxy addresses as they begin and that the technology to do this is already in existence. “The Chinese authorities either developed or imported a system that sniffs the network for signs of proxies. A user, frantically typing in proxy addresses until he finds one that isn’t blocked, effectively provides the government with a tidy blacklist.”⁴⁵

⁴² Bai Jinghong, Sparkice Internet Café manager. Taken from Barme and Sang, “The Great Firewall of China”.

⁴³ see http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.06/china_pr.html

⁴⁴ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet”.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

Dr Stephen Hsu, Chief Executive of Safeweb, may seek to “force the Chinese government to accept the pro-democracy consequences of the Internet,”⁴⁶ but he will have a difficult ‘cat and mouse’ game to play. This game will be difficult to win unless the U.S. government is prepared to invest as much in breaking the Chinese firewall as the Chinese government is prepared to invest in constructing it. Gutmann points out that “at the moment it is a laughably small priority.”⁴⁷ Safeweb’s Triangle Boy project is still at risk from hackers, known as *heike* 黑客 (black guests) by the Chinese, not in short supply in China. Gutmann stresses how unlikely it would be for the U.S. government to provide the substantial investment required “to fully manage such a multi-pronged private-and-public defense [sic] of Internet freedom.”⁴⁸

The Art of Interception

Although the Chinese government has made significant strides towards blocking objectionable content, it recognises the difficulties in doing this and is not relying solely on this method of controlling the Internet. Even if it acknowledges that certain communications may be impossible to block, it is not allowing that realization to dampen its endeavour. On the contrary, China is investing time and money in acquiring and developing software and hardware which will filter out certain information without needing to block IP addresses.

Chat rooms and bulletin boards in China are monitored by what are known as ‘big mamas’. These supervisors monitor and delete harmful comments in real time from the room or bulletin board. This has been happening since the inception of these types of forum in China but not until recently has the process started to be automated.

⁴⁶ Stephen Hsu, CEO of Safeweb. Taken from Jennifer Lee, “U.S. May Help Chinese Evade Net Censorship”.

⁴⁷ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Martin Regg Cohn points out that ‘to give censors enough time to excise problematic postings, after they’ve been tipped off by the software, the forum operates with an unpublicized two-hour lag. That way, censors can delete offending remarks before anyone else sees them.’⁴⁹ The users of these forums are unaware of the censorship process because the comments will appear on their screen immediately. However theirs will be the only screen it will appear on for at least two hours.

New software continues to become available to the Chinese government to control the spread of certain Internet content. It comes as no surprise that as well as developing its own solutions the Chinese government has been talking to foreign companies to help it control the ‘worldwide web’. Gutmann mentions that China Telecom has been having discussions with an Israeli company called iCognito, which invented a program called “artificial content recognition”. The software learns which sites to filter out as the user surfs the Internet. It was designed “to filter out ‘gambling, shopping, job search, pornography, stock quotes, or other non-business material’ but the first question from the Chinese buyers is invariably: Can it stop Falun Gong?”⁵⁰

It has long been assumed that, while it is not an immense undertaking to filter out certain websites, the censorship of e-mail is close to impossible. This supposition has proved to be a little short-sighted. Software exists to monitor and filter out certain keywords even in e-mail communications. Kathleen Hartford explains in her article for ‘Current History’ that “sophisticated search software can pluck a handful of potentially suspect messages out of millions. Traffic analysis – a technique that Chinese security agencies already use – can identify communication hot spots or trace

⁴⁹ Martin Regg Cohn, (2001), “China Seeks to build the Great Firewall”, Toronto Star, 21st July 2001.

⁵⁰ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

messages emanating from particular sources.”⁵¹ This could be a worrying proposition for those who have come to regard e-mail as undetectable and have begun to use it for their causes such as the China Democracy Party, Falun Gong, Tunnel magazine, VIP Reference and Chinese News Digest. Hartford provides us with the chilling warning that ‘any digitized communication can be recorded, categorized, and searched. If the thought that they cannot possibly read every e-mail message gives you comfort, keep this in mind: they don’t need to.’⁵²

It appears that this intelligent censorship does not stop with Chinese e-mail addresses. Keywords coming through a web based e-mail program can also be isolated. Gutmann points out that whilst in China he “received an e-mail from a U.S. friend (in a browser-based Hotmail account, no less, which in theory should be difficult to monitor) with the words ‘China’, ‘unrest’ ‘labor’ [sic] and ‘Xinjiang’ in queer half-tone brackets, as if the words had been picked out by a filter.”⁵³ While this may have been a simple warning demonstrating that ‘Big Brother’ is watching, there is no conceivable reason why this technology could not be used for a more sinister purpose in the future.

This kind of technological censorship may not frighten the truly determined activist or hacker, but it is credible that for the vast majority of the population these measures would serve their purpose. Orville Schell is quoted by Andrew Leonard in his article for ‘Salon 21st’ entitled ‘Chairman Rupert’s Little Red Bucks’ as having said “I think a lot of digital revolutionaries...believe that the information revolution is

⁵¹ Kathleen Hartford, “Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics”, *Current History*, 99(638), (<http://www.pollycyber.com/pubs/ch/home.htm>).

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

uncontrollable but I'm not so sanguine. I think it's uncontrollable for the hard-core hackers, but for ordinary people it's quite controllable.”⁵⁴

Foreign Companies – help or hindrance?

“The American business presence in China is deeply, perhaps fatally, compromised as an agent for liberalizing change.”

*Ethan Gutmann*⁵⁵

In 1999 the Chinese government decided to ban all foreign investment in the Internet in China due to its concerns over the politically sensitive content already available at the time. “Information Minister Wu Jichuan said that foreign investment was not allowed by law and that China now planned to clean up the ‘irregularities.’”⁵⁶ These new regulations were discussed a great deal in the international press at the time but since then, it would appear, the Chinese government has changed its mind. In 2001 the government allowed Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation to enter the domestic market.⁵⁷ In addition to this, deals have also been struck with AOL, Netscape Communications, Yahoo and Sun Microsystems.⁵⁸ The entry of foreign companies into the Chinese domestic Internet market would be viewed by some idealists as a positive step towards the liberalization of the medium. However, the assumption that market forces will break down the regulation of the Internet in China would appear to be excessively optimistic. In reality the presence of foreign companies on the scene has had the reverse effect. As Bryan Pfaffenberger points out, “the regime is getting

⁵⁴ Orville Schell

taken from Andrew Leonard, (1997), “Chairman Rupert’s Little Red Bucks”, Salon 21st, 20th February 1997 (<http://www.salon.com/feb97/21st/article970220.html>).

⁵⁵ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁵⁶ BBC, (1999) “China bans Internet investment”, BBC News Online, 15th September 1999, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/business/the_economy/newsid_448000/448305.stm).

⁵⁷ Jason Nisse, (2001), “Beijing breaks law for Murdoch”, The Independent, 31st March 2001, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/story.jsp?story=64007>).

⁵⁸ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

plenty of help from foreign investors and IT corporations, who leave their high-minded, free speech ideals at home.”⁵⁹

The media has constructed an image of a prosperous, domestic market for portals and search engines by pointing to such success stories as Sohu, Netease and Sina. However, Gutmann discovered by talking to a former Yahoo representative that Yahoo is actually the most popular portal site in China and that its own management had “fudged the hit rate” to appease a xenophobia present in Chinese Internet circles. He also points out that the American company’s appeasement measures are not limited to falsifying statistics. The ‘big mammas’ prevalent in China’s own chat rooms and bulletin boards seem to be present in the Yahoo Chinese chat rooms. The comments will be dealt with in a less oppressive way – the offender’s details will not be passed on to the police – but politically sensitive comments will not go unchecked. The comment will only appear on the screen of the author, who will be sent a gracious e-mail warning. Gutmann describes it as “censorship...with a New Age nod to self-esteem.”⁶⁰

Yahoo’s eagerness to placate the Chinese government does not begin and end in the chat room. Gutmann explains that a search on Chinese Yahoo using the phrase “Taiwan independence” would show no results. A search for “VIP Reference” would only show a government site critical of the dissident publication. It is also interesting to note that Yahoo “rejected an attempt by Voice of America to buy ad space”.⁶¹

AOL-Time Warner has made sure that it has not been left out of the expanding Chinese Internet market with shares in ‘China.com’⁶² as well as owning CETV, a

⁵⁹ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Internet in China”.

⁶⁰ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Robert Conlin & James Hollander, (1999), “AOL Acquires Equity Stake in China.com”, E-Commerce Times, 25th June 1999, (<http://www.ecommercetimes.com/perl/story/665.html>).

cable television channel in Guangdong province.⁶³ The company is eager to gain further entry into the lucrative market and has been “weighing up the pros and cons of informing on dissidents if the Public Security Bureau so requests”.⁶⁴

The involvement of foreign companies in China’s Internet does not stop at those willing to abide by government regulations in order to take a slice of the market. China has not been able to build its national firewall on its own; it has relied on Western companies to supply the technology and expertise to make this ‘Big Brother’ project viable. “Eager for a slice of the action, the major global networking companies – Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems and Bay Networks, among others – cheerfully compete to supply the gear that makes it all possible.”⁶⁵

The most notable contribution has been made by Cisco Systems, as mentioned earlier, who have developed “a router device, integrator, and firewall box specially designed for the government’s telecom monopoly.”⁶⁶ These devices have been bought in their thousands by China Telecom; the financing for which has been provided by IBM. Information is sent around the Internet in small packets which is supposed to make it difficult to intercept. However Cisco’s routers can look into the packets, intercept information and perform keyword searches. David Zhou, a Cisco engineer, told Gutmann “We don’t care about the [Chinese government’s] rules. It’s none of Cisco’s business.”⁶⁷ Zhou also conceded that Cisco is subject to the “scrutiny of State Security, the Public Security Bureau, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).”⁶⁸ With that information in mind it would be difficult to refute Bryan Pfaffenberger’s claim that

⁶³ Joe McDonald, (2001), “AOL signs Landmark Deal with China”, *Washington Post*, 22nd October 2001, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/aponline/20011022/aponline124610_000.htm).

⁶⁴ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁶⁵ Barne and Sang, “The Great Firewall of China”.

⁶⁶ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁶⁷ David Zhou, Systems engineer manager for Cisco, Beijing.

Taken from Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

“the Internet is emerging as a capable tool by which the regime advances repression with the help of multinational corporations and the international financial community.”⁶⁹

Regulation and Retribution

“Warning! Please take note that the following issues are prohibited according to Chinese law: 1) Criticism of the PRC Constitution. 2) Revealing State secrets and discussion about overthrowing the Communist government. 3) Topics which damage the reputation of the State”

*Translation of message at the login to the chat rooms of Sohu.com*⁷⁰

Regulation

In addition to restricting access to websites, monitoring chat rooms and bulletin boards, and intercepting suspect e-mail messages, the Chinese government has been producing legislation to control the Internet since the foundation of the medium in China. To ensure maximum effect the regulations are targeted towards four separate groups – Internet users, Internet cafés, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs.) These regulations began as far back as 1996 when State Council order no. 195 ‘Temporary Regulations Governing Computer Information Networks and the Internet’ came into effect, which included the clause “Under no circumstances should the Internet be used to endanger national security or betray state secrets.”⁷¹ The legislation is continually updated. In October 2000 further regulations prohibited “content that subverts state power, ‘disturbs social order’, undermines reunification with Taiwan, spreads rumors [sic], ‘preaches the teaching of evil cults’,

⁶⁹ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Internet in China”.

⁷⁰ Taken from Martin Regg Cohn, (2001) “China Seeks to build the Great Firewall”, Toronto Star, 21st July 2001.

⁷¹ Summary of section from State Council order no. 195 taken from Geremie R. Barme and Sang Ye, “The Great Firewall of China”.

distributes ‘salacious materials’, dispenses pornography, slanders others, or harms the ‘honor’ [sic] of China.” The latest regulations of January 2002 state that “All ISPs operating in ‘sensitive and strategic sectors’ such as news sites and bulletin board services must record details about users, including viewing times, addresses, phone numbers, and account numbers. ISPs are also required to install software that would record every message sent and received by their users. If an ISP finds a message that it thinks violates the law, the ISP must send a copy of the message to three government agencies (the Ministry of Information Industry, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Bureau for the Protection of State Secrets), then delete the message. All key network management systems are now required to use domestically produced software.”⁷²

Just as there has been legislation to control the user, cafés and ISPs, there have also been regulations controlling ICPs based in China. In November 2002 regulations were issued demanding that “sites publishing news must obtain special licences, may never generate their own content, and instead may only republish stories from official sources.”⁷³ The warning at the entrance to the Sohu chat rooms (see above) is followed by the message “If you are a Chinese national and willingly choose to break these laws, SOHU.com is legally obliged to report you to the Public Security Bureau”⁷⁴, a curt reminder that the heavy arm of the law will not be far behind.

Retribution

The Chinese government has put its legislation into practice by making it clear that it will not hesitate to prosecute those that violate it. “The police have access to a

⁷² Regulations from the Ministry of Information Industry, January 2002. Translation taken from the Digital Freedom Network, (<http://www.dfn.org/focus/china/shutdown.htm#jan2002>).

⁷³ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

⁷⁴ Translation taken from Martin Regg Cohn, “China Seeks to build the Great Firewall”.

nationwide network and have used it to track down a large number of criminals.”⁷⁵ Famous cases include Wang Youcai (sentenced on 21st December, 1998 to 11 years in prison for “trying to organize a peaceful opposition party and sending e-mail messages to dissidents in the U.S.”⁷⁶), software engineer Lin Hai (sentenced on 20th January, 1999 to “two years in prison for providing 30,000 e-mail addresses to the pro-democracy Internet newsletter V.I.P. Reference”⁷⁷), and Qi Yanchen, an activist with the dissident organization Chinese Development Union (“arrested on September 2, 1999 by police while preparing to print and distribute the newsletter V.I.P. Reference”⁷⁸). In addition many other “democracy organizers, human-rights activists, Falun Gong members, scholars, and other dissidents have been arrested for on-line crimes.”⁷⁹

In addition to arresting on-line dissidents and people who download or distribute banned material, the government has taken action against ICPs and Internet cafés. Stories appear regularly in the newspapers concerning the closure of Internet cafés. The police seem to have a large scale crackdown every few months, the most recent being in May 2002 when 200 cafés in Shanghai were shut down. According to a BBC News Online article 17,000 *wangbas* 网吧 were closed down last year for failing to install the required monitoring software.⁸⁰

When ICPs have published unapproved content they have been prosecuted and fined. Pre-emptive action is also taken by the government who ordered many chat rooms to “suspend operations around the 10th anniversary of the bloody June 4, 1989, military

⁷⁵ Dali L. Yang, “The Great Net of China”.

⁷⁶ Digital Freedom Network, (<http://dfn.org/stand/china/freesci/freesci.htm>).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Nina Hachiagan, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

⁸⁰ BBC, (2002), “Shanghai cybercafés shut down”, BBC News Online, 6th May 2002, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_1971000/1971153.stm).

crackdown on student protesters in Tiananmen Square.”⁸¹ With these kinds of measures in place, it is no great surprise that Internet users, cafés, ISPs and ICPs alike have started to practice ‘self-censorship’.

Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics⁸²

Self-censorship

Not wishing to aggravate the government or jeopardize the relative freedoms that Chinese companies and individuals have been given in recent years, Internet users and providers alike have fostered a culture of self-censorship. Nina Hachigian points out that “the self-censorship that the regime promotes among individuals and domestic Internet content providers (ICPs) is the primary way officials control what the Chinese viewers see.”⁸³ This is, in part, facilitated by “official encouragement and sponsorship of Chinese-language content creation”,⁸⁴ which has helped to create a kind of China-only network, despite the fact that the official ‘intranet’ was abandoned in 1997.

The Chinese portals (themselves increasing exponentially) provide links to a rapidly expanding plethora of Chinese sites, mainly based within mainland China, supportive of the Communist regime. During frequent visits to Internet cafés whilst in China I observed that most ‘surfers’ do not seem to go beyond these sites due in part to the overwhelming quantity of mainland web content and also to a poor understand of English, the prime language of the Internet. On the whole, mainland sites, through fear of clamp-down and reluctance to disturb the status quo, keep to the prescribed government regulations and provide news only from official sources. Oliver Kwan,

⁸¹ Reuters, (2000), “In China, The Net Grows Up: To Avoid Censors, ‘Web Worms’ Police Themselves”, [ABCNEWS.com](http://abcnews.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/china_webpolice000125.html), 25th January 2000, (http://abcnews.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/china_webpolice000125.html).

⁸² Title of an article by Kathleen Hartford for ‘Current History’, (see earlier footnotes or bibliography).

⁸³ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

⁸⁴ Kathleen Hartford, “Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics”.

director of business development for Netease says that “this shows how mature the Internet has grown in China. It’s self-regulating.”⁸⁵

Self-regulation has existed for many years in the China media market. It has already been mentioned how Yahoo has appeased the Chinese government. Rupert Murdoch’s Hong Kong-based Star TV has been self-regulating for many years, removing the BBC from its output from 1994 to 2002.⁸⁶ As Pfaffenberger points out “almost all Internet users have powerful incentives to support the government and to refrain from voicing any criticism”.⁸⁷

Propaganda and Nationalism

“The delicate dynamic of government regulation and corporate compliance has dampened the democratization trend that so many had predicted soon after the Internet took off in China. Now, nationalism is gaining ground by default.”

*Martin Regg Cohn*⁸⁸

The growth of the Internet in China has provided the government with a vehicle to spread propaganda and promote nationalism more powerful than it has ever had before. By only allowing officially approved news to appear on portals and websites the government is reaching out to more people than it has ever been able to in the past. The government has been able to take advantage of the power of the medium to help sway the population towards its own views. This is particularly prevalent when important international events take place. For example when NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 the People’s Daily set up a chat room called the ‘Anti-bombing Forum’, later changed to the ‘Forum for Empowering the Nation’. “The great attraction of the Internet...as a sounding board against America, and a

⁸⁵ Oliver Kwan, director of business development for Netease.com taken from Reuters, “In China, The Net Grows Up: To Avoid Censors, ‘Web Worms’ Police Themselves”.

⁸⁶ Lokman Tsui, “Internet in China: Big Brother is Watching You”, p18.

⁸⁷ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Internet in China”.

⁸⁸ Martin Regg Cohn, “China Seeks to build the Great Firewall”.

rallying point for patriotism, is a source of comfort to the Communist Party. And it is no accident.”⁸⁹ In these chat rooms a great deal of anti-Western rhetoric is openly visible. This was also the case during the aftermath of the U.S. Spy Plane incident off the coast of Hainan Island last year. “Most observers believe that the government not only encouraged but actively aided students who used the Internet to plan days of violent protest outside the U.S. Embassy.”⁹⁰ The government, through years of press control and careful manipulation of information, has managed to create a society with quite rigid ideas. As is the case the world over, “people gravitate to the sites whose information confirms their pre-existing views.”⁹¹ After discussions with one of the ‘Big Mamas’ from the People’s Daily chat room, Cohn points out that “pruning anti-American rhetoric from the Web site keeps him busier than censoring anti-party comments”.⁹²

Let a hundred schools of thought contend, let a hundred flowers bloom

Mao Zedong, May 1956.

Despite the large quantity of rhetoric in support of the regime and against ‘Western Imperialism’ prevalent in chat rooms there are, to a much lesser degree, some anti-party comments. Chairman Mao understood the effectiveness of allowing people to speak their minds. It enabled him to discover what people thought of the regime and who his enemies were. Ethan Gutmann describes a modern equivalent of the Hundred Flowers Movement designed “to expose anyone who disagreed with the legitimacy of [CCP] rule and to attract massive Western investment.”⁹³ Internet forums “offer officials who lack the benefit of a free media a way to discover what citizens are

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Internet in China”.

⁹¹ Kathleen Hartford, “Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics”.

⁹² Martin Regg Cohn, “China Seeks to build the Great Firewall”.

⁹³ Ethan Gutmann, “Who Lost China’s Internet?”

thinking.”⁹⁴ When criticism of the government is brought up in a chat room the government can use this to its own advantage, and quickly respond with propaganda to quell the unrest and inundate the medium with its own message.

Incentive and Apathy

“As long as control efforts are directed at political content and not on-line commercial activity, they are unlikely to dampen the enthusiasm of entrepreneurs and investors.”

*Nina Hachigian*⁹⁵

The Internet has brought relative freedom to China and, while many argue that this will act as incentive to organize a democracy movement, there is a more compelling argument that few people “care to challenge the ruling regime during the present period of economic and political stability.”⁹⁶ Despite the fact that Chinese users know how to access foreign material (“they gleefully downloaded the Starr Report as soon as it went on-line”⁹⁷) they generally do not bother, due to a political apathy now firmly rooted within Chinese society since the repression of the Tiananmen Square Movement of 1989. Pfaffenberger points out that “despite the technical possibility of accessing banned sites, the flow of external access is best described as a mere trickle. Blocked sites such as Human Rights in China and China News Digest report receiving only a few dozen hits per week from within China.”⁹⁸

Oliver Kwan of Netease says of chat rooms that “contrary to what people in the West have imagined, there’s very little negative or political material posted...The hottest bulletin boards are love and relationships.”⁹⁹ It would seem that, much like the rest of

⁹⁴ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Kathleen Hartford, “Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics”.

⁹⁸ Bryan Pfaffenberger “The Internet in China”.

⁹⁹ Oliver Kwan, director of business development for Netease.com taken from Reuters, “In China, The Net Grows Up: To Avoid Censors, ‘Web Worms’ Police Themselves”.

the world, Chinese Internet users are interested in entertainment rather than politics, stocks and shares rather than revolt, and cyber-dating rather than secret society-forming. Hachigian maintains that “The Net cannot create rebellious social forces”¹⁰⁰, but can only nurture those that are already there. Chinese Internet users have “little incentive to use the network for seditious purposes...[users in the IT sector] have little to gain from undertaking actions that would lead the government to crack down on the Internet; in contrast, their futures depend on rapid Internet growth and keeping out of trouble with the government.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Nina Hachigian, “China’s Cyber Strategy”.

¹⁰¹ Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Internet in China”.

4) Conclusion

“Individuals will no doubt deviate from the generalization, but this does not spell a failure of authoritarian control. Smart authoritarians do not try to control everything; they focus on controlling what really matters...keeping the vast majority from politically sensitive areas, and preventing the nonconforming small minority from organizing enough to mount a challenge. The imperfect controls that already exist, even applied with the velvet glove outermost, are sufficient to move the vast majority.”

*Kathleen Hartford*¹⁰²

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the lofty hopes for the Internet in China espoused in the West were nothing more than romantic ideals. It is quite possible that one day the Internet will be a powerful tool to liberate China from the grip of the Communist regime but in the short term it seems that the Internet may in fact strengthen the party's hold over the people. While new technology is surfacing all the time to circumvent the government's controls, the Chinese government is investing far more in controlling the Internet than Western governments are in liberating it. An example of the latest technology is a new piece of software called 'Peek-a-booty', which has recently appeared. It promises to “circumvent government censorship”,¹⁰³ but iOpus Software has already announced that their STARR monitoring software can easily detect the use of Peek-a-Booty on a computer.¹⁰⁴ Western business is certainly doing very little to help loosen the regime's hold over the medium. In fact, it would appear that companies like Cisco, AOL, News Corporation and Yahoo are having quite the opposite effect. In addition, much evidence suggests that the government's

¹⁰² Kathleen Hartford, “Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics”.

¹⁰³ Will Knight, (2002), “Peekabooty aims to banish internet censorship”, NewScientist.com, 19th February 2002, (<http://newscientist.com/news/print.jsp?id=ns99991948>).

¹⁰⁴ STARR - the Anti Peek-a-Booty Software, iOpus Software, (<http://www.iopus.com/guides/PeekaBooty.htm>).

technical measures to control the Internet are less relevant than their legislative measures, and that a combination of fear, contentment and apathy will prevent the Internet from being used to its full advantage in bringing democracy to China.

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