

The Taste of Information

State Attempts to Control the Internet

Research >
China

'Internet Essayist Arrested', 'China Blocks Blog Again', 'Crackdown deepens on the Internet': the headlines that most often reach us in the Western media concern censorship, detention of cyber dissidents and the blocking of websites. Many Western observers nonetheless remain optimistic on political freedoms following on the tails of social change. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2003, p.19) wrote enthusiastically on his recent trip to Manchuria: 'I can't help feeling that when people get multiple choices in ordering a cup of coffee, it's only a matter of time before they demand choices in national politics.' Unfortunately the degree of choice in coffee has not spilled over to choice in politics and information. Information in the Peoples' Republic of China still comes in one flavour only, that of the Party-State.

By Lokman TSUI

At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva last December, participants expressed 'a common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize, and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life'. According to this declaration, freedom of speech, information and communication are the means to a better quality of life. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, has followed its strict line in curbing these freedoms. Many believed a new situation would arise with the growth of commercial media, but as Chin-Chuan Lee (2003, p.12) argues: 'under no circumstances will the Party-State relinquish its editorial authority.' The internet, with its open and decentralized structure, poses new challenges to the Party-State's editorial authority yet again.

Over its decade-long relationship with the internet, China has made various attempts to gain political control over the medium. The first few attempts to regulate the internet focused on the development of a nationwide intranet. Control of the web was to be based on inclusion rather than exclusion, on regulating what people could see, instead of what they could not see. Thus the national intranet offered only those parts of the internet deemed desirable, a strategy opposite to offering the whole internet minus its censored sites. These intranets, however, never caught the public's interest, failed to draw a profit and died quietly. The government shifted its focus towards a policy of control based on exclusion.

The infrastructure of the Chinese internet consists of several key providers that carry the mass of traffic inside the country. Traffic to sites hosted outside China must pass through an international gateway maintained by China Telecom. This international gateway makes it possible to screen content and filter out websites based on a blacklist. Websites that are blocked include those of the Voice of America and Amnesty International, amongst many others. (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003)

As websites are relatively cost-effective ways for anybody to publish, China has taken steps to prevent them from becoming threats to stability. Hosting services based outside China that allow users to create personal homepages, such as Geocities, are typically blocked, as it would be impossible to hold an individual author responsible for the content. The latest development is weblogs, sometimes abbreviated to *blogs*: personal websites on a particular subject frequently updated with new information. On account of their low barriers for self-expression, the number of weblogs exploded; the government soon decided to block the most popular service that hosts them, Blogspot. Weblogs, from a technical perspective are not much of an innovation, but as this foremost social phenomenon continues to develop, it will be interesting to see how the regulation of these weblogs will take shape.

There are, however, more ways to censor a website than to just block it. A case in point is the Google search engine; it was first blocked in August 2002. Shortly thereafter, instead of being blocked, internet surfers attempting to access Google were redirected to Chinese search engines such as Openfind, Globepage or www.chinaren.com. After an uproar by Chinese *netizens* and the international media, Google is available again, though searches now produce modified results.

A more effective way for the government to control the flow of information is to offer content, in Chinese. The government closes demand with one hand and guarantees supply with the other, attacking the problem from both sides. This tactic has been deployed to counter the success of Google in China. It developed www.chinasearch.com to become the



Courtesy of www.china.org.cn

country's main search engine. Sina, one of the major portals in China, has already adopted Chinasearch, whose search results filter out links considered subversive or pornographic. Only approved news items can be published on news websites; the main online content providers thus avoid political news, syndicating these from official news publications such as *Xinhua*. They focus on relatively safe content instead, such as entertainment and sports news.

Among the non-web services offered by the internet, Usenet is practically banned in China, and illustrates the effectiveness of control based on inclusion. The alternative, the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) are a very popular segment of the internet in China. These BBS services are regulated by moderators who screen incoming messages, removing those deemed offensive or off-topic. Software filters aid the moderators and automatically search for messages with sensitive keywords. In extreme cases, brute force is employed and the BBS can be shut down for years, as happened to the highly popular *Wei Ming* BBS of Peking University in 1996. The closure of such a high profile BBS served as a warning to others, leading to self-regulation among other BBS. Self-regulation is also prevalent among companies: over three hundred signed a voluntary pledge of adherence to the regulations. Likewise, the detention of cyber dissidents has intimidated individual users into exercising self-censorship. (Tsui 2003: 70-71). This discussion reminds us that China's attempts to control the flow of information are extensive and ongoing.

While most websites are accessible despite the blacklist, internet use rarely crosses Chinese borders. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey report (2003, p.32), Chinese users access websites located in China almost 80 per cent of the time. This does not include Chinese language websites from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore, which together make up another 13 per cent. Western websites are thus accessed, at most, only 7 per cent of the time. This is a sobering figure in contrast to the sky-high expectations of many Western analysts. The flow of information is restricted not only by top down controls but also by bottom up factors, such as language barriers, disinterest in alternative media and diverse levels of self-regulation. (Mulvenon & Chase 2002: 49)

Food for thought

The attempts of the Party-State to control the internet have been, thus far, reasonably successful. How much of its success, however, is due to bottom-up social factors rather than to top-down political control? Three issues come to mind. First, instead of focusing on attempts to control websites that barely appear on the radar of the average Chinese netizen, we might focus on the things that really interest the average user. What makes people spend 80 per cent of their time on Chinese websites? Second, instead of focusing on access to

information, how does the Party-State regulate freedom of and access to communication on the internet? The real impact of the internet might not lie in access to information, but in access to expressive communication, as represented by the BBS. Despite all attempts to control it, the internet is still freer than any other media. The issue then is whether, in the end, freedom of speech, information and communication will allow the Chinese to fulfill their potential and improve their quality of life. After all, freedom of speech, information and communication are not the end, but merely the means to a better quality of life. <

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List of Definitions

BBS or bulletin board system (*dianzi gonggaoban*): a kind of database where users can log in and leave messages for others. These messages are often grouped according to topic. The BBS has become one of the most popular features of the Chinese internet and thousand of groups are offered by the big portals. The variety of topics characterizes the social changes which have taken place within the last decade in China.

Chat room (*liaotianshi*): a virtual space where users may communicate in real-time. As a result of the fragmentation of the interest groups, the possible anonymity of chat rooms and the lack of incentives for longer commitment, the discussions in many chat rooms tend to be superficial.

Netizen (*wangmin*): this term, which has been attributed to Howard Rheingold, refers to the 'citizen of the internet'. It is important to realize that in a narrow sense 'netizens' do not include users who come to the net for profane reasons such as making profits or who regard the internet as merely a service provided by others. An important feature of the netizen is his/her active engagement in creating a public sphere on the Net.

Weblogs (sometimes shortened to 'blog'): a website of personal or non-commercial origin that uses a dated log format and that is frequently updated with new information about a particular subject or range of subjects. The information can be written by the site owner, gleaned from other websites or other sources, or contributed by users. A weblog may consist of the recorded ideas of an individual (a sort of diary) or be a complex collaboration open to anyone. Most of the latter are moderated discussions. The rapid increase of the number of weblogs in China, spurred its government to block the most popular host for these weblogs. <