

Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China

Rebecca MacKinnon

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Abstract The Internet simply because it exists in China will not bring democracy to China. It is a tool, not a cause of political change. So far, the Chinese government has succeeded through censorship and regulation in blocking activists from using the Internet as an effective political tool. Likewise, blogs may be a catalyst for long-term political change because they are helping to enlarge the space for collaboration and conversation on subjects not directly related to political activism or regime change. However their role in China is more likely to involve political evolution—not revolution.

Keywords China · Internet · Democracy · Blogs

1 Introduction

Even in the United States, there is much debate as to whether weblogs will contribute to a wider discourse amongst citizens that could make government more accountable. Yet there is a common popular assumption that the Internet—and with it weblogs and other forms of online, participatory media—is ultimately a force for democratization. In May 2005, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote an op-ed titled “Death by a Thousand Blogs,” in which he concluded: “it’s the Chinese leadership itself that is digging the Communist Party’s grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband” (Kristof 2005).

Such conclusions are frequently echoed in the news media, but scholarship on China’s Internet and politics takes a more sober view. While the Chinese government has supported the development of the Internet as a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange, it has succeeded in preventing people from using the Internet to organize any kind of viable political opposition. The Open Net Initiative concluded in its 2004–05

R. MacKinnon (✉)
Journalism & Media Studies Ctr, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong
e-mail: rmack@hku.hk

R. MacKinnon
e-mail: rebecca.mackinnon@mac.com

study of Chinese Internet censorship that “China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world” (OpenNet Initiative 2005). A ten-fold explosion in the number of Chinese weblogs in 2005 posed a challenge to the regime. However, so far this challenge has proven manageable.

The Internet generally and blogs more specifically can potentially be a *medium* and *tool* for political change in China. But being a medium should not be confused with being a *cause* of change (Pan 2006a; Schafer 2006). The causes will be much broader social, economic and political factors. Given the right circumstances, online citizens’ media such as blogs may indeed facilitate, amplify, and accelerate these causes. But blogs will not *be* the cause. People deciding to take action in large numbers, organized by charismatic and capable leaders, will be the cause.

Below is the story of the evolution of blogs in China into the beginning of 2006. It is a story of how the Chinese regime has managed the advent of online participatory media surprisingly well, thanks in no small part to cooperation from foreign and domestic business.

2 The Internet and China’s open door

Comparative study of the Internet and politics in different countries has led scholars like Daniel Drezner to conclude that the Internet’s impact on politics varies depending on the system. Rather than serving as an agent of democratic change worldwide, the Internet instead “merely reinforces the pre-existing dynamics between states and non-state actors” with one substantial exception: “the large group of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states that wish to exploit the economic possibilities of the information society” (Drezner 2005). While China certainly fits into this category, its leaders are well aware of the risky path they have chosen. They are determined to prevent the Internet from serving as a tool for “color revolution” in the way that online media and communication tools empowered activists in Ukraine and Lebanon. Thus in 2005 the Chinese government updated its regulations controlling online news and information, and aggressively leaned on organizations hosting online chatrooms and blogs to stop the spread of online discussions about recent local government crackdowns against farmer protests in the Chinese countryside.

The Internet may be new, but its challenge to the Chinese leadership is not. Balancing openness with control has been the central challenge for the Chinese Communist Party since Deng Xiaoping began his policy of “reform and opening up” in 1979. On the one hand he opened China’s doors to foreign trade and investment, allowing Chinese to study in the West for the first time since the Communist Revolution, while kick-starting a process of gradual economic reforms. On the other hand, Deng sought to control this whole process through economic incentives combined with police coercion and even the occasional use of military force. This approach has so far ensured that the rise of a new commercial class was not accompanied by political change. Public exposure to foreign ideas did not lead to the rise of an alternative political power base capable of overthrowing the Chinese Communist Party. One of Deng’s favorite sayings in the early 1980’s was: “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.” The regime has thus far been successful at fly-swatting: not all of the “flies” have been swatted, but enough problems have been managed to keep the regime in power. The fact that the lives of most urban residents have substantially improved since reforms began 25 years ago has of course been another key factor helping the government. And while peasants may riot in the countryside against corruption and economic inequality, the regime has so far been effective at preventing leaders of local movements with specific, localized demands from linking up to form any kind of cohesive national movement with larger political goals.

When the Internet arrived in China in 1994, the Chinese leadership recognized it had no choice but to open that window too—for the sake of China’s global economic competitiveness. The Internet is yet another plane on which the Communist Party wages its ideological battles against foreign “flies”—attempts via the open door to subvert the regime’s power and legitimacy. A 2005 *People’s Daily* editorial encapsulated this view:

As long as we use more ways of properly looking at the Internet, we can make use of the best parts, we go for the good and stay away from the bad and we use it for our purposes, then we can turn it around on them. Just as we can defeat the well-armed American military in the Korean war of yesteryear, we won’t be defeated in this huge Internet war by the various intranational and international reactionary ideological trends in the various areas (Wu 2005).

A new set of “fly-swatters” has been brought out: Internet regulations and a system for monitoring and control at multiple levels. As with the “reform and opening” policy generally, flies still get in, but the economic and social benefits that enter through this newly opened door are seen to outweigh not only the costs of swatting flies—but also the damage to regime credibility created by the “flies” that do get through.

The Chinese government has other factors working in its favor. According to a 2005 study on urban Chinese Internet use funded by the Markle Foundation and conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), most Chinese Internet users seek out entertainment online, not hard news or serious political discussion: “rather than being an information highway, the Internet in China is more like an entertainment highway” (Guo et al. 2005). The Chinese government has also pursued a nationwide e-government strategy: using online mechanisms for citizen feedback, complaints and suggestions, etc. as part of a strategy to bolster regime legitimacy (Kluver 2005a). Forums, chatrooms and blogs also serve as a “safety valve” by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence, thus giving people more things to do with their frustrations before considering taking their gripes to the streets.

On the other hand, nationalistic diatribes and rants against Japan and the United States are generally allowed to rage unchecked as long as they do not lead to offline protest activity that might spin out of control (Anderson 2005). In this way, China’s system of Internet censorship, control, and propaganda, while by no means impenetrable, is effective enough that the picture of the world seen by the average Chinese Internet user is skewed in the regime’s favor.

What’s more, as China’s pool of Internet users increases, it appears that a decreasing percentage take advantage of technologies such as proxy servers that make it possible to circumvent Internet censorship. According to a 2000 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) survey of Internet use in five Chinese cities, 10% of users surveyed admitted to regularly using, and 25% to occasionally using, proxy servers to circumvent censorship (Guo and Bu 2001). A 2005 CASS Internet user survey, asking the same question in door-to-door interviews in five major Chinese cities, received the following response: “never”: 71.2%; “seldom”: 19.7%; “sometimes”: 5.9%; “often”: 2.5%; “frequently”: 0.6% (Guo et al. 2005). Anecdotal evidence further suggests that while many people—especially university students—are aware of proxy servers and know how to use them, the percentage of people using proxy servers daily to access blocked sites is relatively small. One student blogger pen-named “Undersound” estimated that only about five percent of the people he knows actually use proxy servers to access blocked websites. “Most of my classmates and friends just don’t need to resort to proxy,” he wrote. “They just view the major websites in China, which would comply with government and have no risk of shut down.”

On the other hand, it is easy to access information showing the Chinese government in a positive light, or at least being responsive to certain problems the regime admits to having. Information criticizing or complaining about the *status quo* does exist online, but it is kept at the level of specific complaints, localized gripes and oblique jokes. Only tech savvy users who know in advance what exists and what they are looking for will access pages about Chinese authorities' human rights abuses, or information relating to the Taiwan secession movement. On the other hand, information about Japanese atrocities, alleged US "secret prisons" and abuses at Abu Ghraib, and belligerent vitriol supporting attacks on Taiwan if it declares independence, are all easily found in Chinese cyberspace. Thanks in part to this filtered view of the world, nationalism and xenophobia have found fertile breeding ground on the Chinese Internet, while a pro-democracy movement has been prevented from growing there (MacKinnon 2005a). This situation is reinforced by recent survey results—surprising to many Westerners—showing that most urban Chinese Internet users actually trust domestic sources of news and information more than they trust the information found on foreign news websites (Guo et al. 2005, pp. 66–67).

Offline, no viable alternative to the current leadership has emerged or been allowed to emerge. China has no Yushenko or Walesa or Havel for people to rally around, and no such person has been allowed to emerge online either. Chinese public opinion remains divided and compartmentalized: while rural farmers are increasingly disgruntled, recent surveys indicate that most urban elites generally feel that they have gained much more control over their lives than they had two decades ago, and are unwilling to sacrifice their economic gains of the past 25 years in exchange for the chaos and uncertain future that a collapse of the CCP and its governing structures would bring (Tang 2005). Without the existence of a viable offline movement, the likelihood of the Internet being used successfully as a tool for political change is even lower. One could even argue that skilful management of the Internet might buy the Chinese Communist Party another few decades in power.

At the same time, the Internet may also be enabling the development of "civil society" and public discourse around policy that could make a gradual evolution toward democracy more likely over the long run. Internet scholar Randolph Kluver argues that it is necessary to "put the impetus for change within China's own cultural and political realities." Rather than argue that the Internet will democratize China—which is an ideologically charged debate, impossible to prove, and depends on how one defines "democracy" in the first place—Kluver (2005b) chooses to advance the "less radical" and "less disruptive" argument that "new forms of civic discourse are emerging."

Some Chinese bloggers have expressed the concern that an excessive focus by Western media on blogs as a vehicle for political dissent may be counterproductive, making the authorities more suspicious of the emergent new forms of online civic discourse than they might otherwise be. Blogs did emerge in 2004 and 2005 as a powerful force in creating new forms of civic discourse online. But there is no evidence that blogs simply by virtue of their existence will foster rapid or dramatic political change. The role of weblogs in Chinese political change will depend not only how people choose to use them but also to what extent the Chinese government succeeds in controlling the use of weblogs for political dissent.

3 Brief history of Chinese blogging, 2002 to early 2006

Despite censorship and government control measures, the Chinese blogosphere exploded in size in 2005. This may seem counter-intuitive to the Western observer, but in the Chinese context it makes sense as part of a larger process of social, political and economic bargaining between government and population that has been going on in all aspects of Chinese life

since reform and opening began (Lieberthal 1996). The Chinese government arrived at an accommodation with businesses that provide blogging software and hosting services to Chinese users: blog-hosting services are allowed to operate as long as they build censorship into their software tools and business processes. Chinese bloggers have no choice but to accept these conditions in order to blog and actually have an audience inside the PRC. Similar accommodations are commonplace throughout China's news, information and entertainment industries, and thus the companies involved have generally not pushed back against censorship requirements.

While all statistics about the size of the Chinese blogosphere are disputed, there is no question that 2005 was China's Year of the Blog. In January 2005, estimates hovered around half a million Chinese blogs; by July, estimates by some Chinese blog-hosting companies put the number as high as 5 million (Anderlini 2005). By December, the Chinese blog search engine Baidu was claiming numbers as high as 36.82 million, a number which several bloggers challenged as improbably high if you take into account "spam blogs" and abandoned blogs (People's Daily Online 2005; Web2.0Focus 2005). Interestingly, by the end of 2005, the total number of weblogs in the entire world was estimated at around 27 million by weblog-tracking service Technorati (Sifry 2006). As Ethan Zuckerman points out in his article in this special issue, it is likely that Chinese blogs are heavily undercounted by global blog-tracking services like Technorati and Blogpulse because Chinese blog-hosting services have not set up their blog software to "ping" the global "pingservers" each time a new blog post is published, as do most U.S. blog hosting services. Be that as it may, according to David Sifry, CEO of Technorati, "some of the significant increases" in 2005 were "due to a proliferation of Chinese-speaking weblogs" (Sifry 2005). In an analysis of worldwide blog-posting activity over the course of a single 24 hour period, Matthew Hurst of Intellisearch Inc./Blogpulse found Chinese users to be three times more active on Microsoft's MSN Spaces than users from any other country, with U.S. users in second place (Hurst 2006).

As in most countries, blogging tools first began to be used in China by the early-adopting tech community. In 2002 web entrepreneur Isaac Mao teamed up with a Chinese school-teacher whom he discovered on Blogger.com, writing one of the earliest Chinese blogs. The two of them founded CNblog.org, which quickly became the hub of a community of Chinese blog and social software enthusiasts who developed the first Chinese language blogging tools, promoting them among their friends and colleagues (Xiao 2004a). Meanwhile, in mid-2002 journalist and web entrepreneur Fang Xingdong set up China's first blog-hosting service, Blogchina (now Bokee). Fang is credited with having coined the most widely-used Chinese term for blog, "bo ke." When Fang launched Blogchina, he found himself spending hours trying to convince Chinese officials that blogging would not be a threat to the regime. "At the time, they thought, 'If everyone can publish, wouldn't we lose control?'" Fang told the *Washington Post* in an interview. "But I argued that a blog is like a person's home, and very few people would put something inappropriate in their home" (Pan 2006b).

Yet it took a different kind of person to popularize blogging more widely in China. In the U.S., many people associate the word "blogger" with political enthusiasts writing diatribes at home in their pajamas. In China many people first associated the Chinese word for "blog" with "sex diary." This is thanks to China's most famous blogger, Mu Zi Mei, who in 2003 rose to national notoriety with her blog containing daily updates about her extremely active and varied sex life. Her blog is credited with having driven thousands of readers—and eventually new bloggers—to her blog hosting provider, Blogcn.com. The fact that Muzimei's sex diary cost her job at a Guangzhou magazine, and the fact that a book compilation of her entries was recalled from bookstores quickly after it hit the shelves, did nothing to dampen her popularity.

By 2005 blogs had crashed the cultural gates. China's editors, station directors, and publishers had always acted as cultural "gatekeepers:" deciding who could and couldn't become known through publication, TV and film appearances, and musical performances. In a major cultural power-shift, pop cultural icons could emerge through blogs, forums, chatrooms, and personal websites, completely outside of the government approved cultural structures.

But while Communist Party propaganda department had lost control over China's culture, in the realm of politics the gates and walls are constantly being rebuilt, upgraded, and reinforced. It would be impossible for a dissident political leader to rise to popularity in the same way that Mu Zimei rose to stardom.

Even so, in 2004 and 2005, bloggers began to break news stories, showing their potential as a vehicle for alternative journalism. Wang Jianshuo, a Shanghai-based engineer working for Microsoft who maintained blogs both in English and Chinese, became widely known for his daily posts describing events in Shanghai during the SARS outbreak of 2003. In 2004, a Beijing-based blogger who posts pseudonymously to a blog called "24 Hours online" broke the story of a murder with eye-witness accounts and pictures. The story was widely picked up by Beijing newspapers, using the blogger as a source and republishing his photographs.

It is important to note, however, that at least through late 2005, while blogs had grown tremendously in popularity and impact they were still overshadowed in influence and popularity by forums and bulletin boards, known as BBS. According to the CASS-Markle Chinese Internet usage study, by late 2005 44.8% of users surveyed used BBS, while only 29.5% used blogs (Guo et al. 2005). A blog is structured to have a distinctive author or small group of authors with distinct identities. While a blog author can write anonymously online, covering one's identity when authorities are determined enough to track down the author requires much more technical skill (see further Zuckerman 2005). The free-for-all structure of the BBS, on the other hand, makes it possible for people wanting to speak freely online to hide in the large crowd of fake user-names and cloak their anonymity more successfully. While the companies or academic institutions hosting BBS services are expected to censor and monitor content posted in their forums, the sheer volume of postings on large sites means that by avoiding sensitive "keywords" that would get caught by the automated filtering software, people are often successful at posting politically sensitive information and opinion for hours and sometimes even days before it is discovered and taken down. For this reason, frustrated journalists in China have generally turned to BBS websites as the place to post newspaper stories and even photographs that are too politically sensitive to get past their editors. The BBS are also the place where politically-minded people of all professions have tended to go for political debates and discussions (see Soong 2005a, 2005b). For this reason, in 2004 the BBS became the target of a government crackdown that deepened throughout 2005. The first casualty was a popular BBS known as "SMTH," hosted at Tsinghua University (China's equivalent of MIT). In the fall of 2004, people who were not currently students at the university were blocked from posting. This, combined with new government regulations requiring BBS users to register their real names with the forum hosts in order to participate, effectively "killed" the SMTH community, since most users were posting anonymously from outside the university. Similar crackdowns were replicated on university BBS across China. Many BBS users needing a new home for their online conversations turned to blogs. As a result, in late 2004 nascent blog hosting companies such as Blogbus and Blogchina (which later became Bokee) reported a sharp increase in new user registrations. CNblog founder Isaac Mao said in an interview with *Global Voices Online* that he believed the BBS crackdown was a significant factor behind the 2005 blog explosion (MacKinnon 2005b).

In April 2005 Chinese public outrage flared up over the historical revisionism in some Japanese textbooks that whitewashed Japanese atrocities in China during World War II.

Thousands of young people, initially inflamed by Chinese patriotic state media rhetoric, hit the streets to express their outrage against Japan, demanding that Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council must be stopped. Spontaneous gatherings were quickly organized thanks to Internet communications—short message services (SMS), BBS and nationalistic online forums with names like “Strong Nation Forum” which happens to be hosted by the state-run *People's Daily*, and anti-Japanese websites like Japanpig.com (<http://www.2222222.cn/jppig/>, Barnathan 2005). Ultimately the authorities brought a halt to the protests, spooked because they had arisen spontaneously from the bottom up and worried that if students felt free to rage in the streets against Japan, they might eventually become emboldened to articulate grievances against their own government. Blogs also played a role in the protests, although it appears that the web forums, BBS and SMS networks played a larger role—and that the primary role of blogs at that time was more related to facilitating discussion than organizing action.

By late Spring of 2005, the Chinese blogosphere had grown sufficiently large that authorities deemed it necessary to regulate it more directly. Bloggers and anybody else hosting what was termed a “non-commercial website” were given a deadline of June 30th, 2005 to register their identities and domain names and obtain a registration number which must be displayed on their site (French 2005; OpenNet Initiative 2006). The consequences for not registering theoretically included arrest, although no such arrests have been reported, while many unregistered blogs were taken down.

After a period of confusion it became clear that people whose blogs were hosted by commercial blog hosting companies like Blogbus, Bokee, DoNews, Sina, and a dozen or so others, including Microsoft's “MSN Spaces” weblog service, were exempt from the registration requirement. Why? Because just like the host organizations for BBS and web forums, the companies running the blog hosting services were held responsible by the government for all content appearing on their users' blogs. Thus they agreed to monitor and censor the blogs appearing on their services, with the understanding that there would be consequences (fines, revocation of business license, etc.) for failing to adequately “manage” their users (MacKinnon 2005c). These blog-hosting services are also expected to hand over user information in specific cases that authorities might take a particular interest in. Such practices are all in accordance with the “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry” rolled out in March 2002, which—although it is voluntary in theory—all Internet content-hosting and portal sites are expected to sign. This expectation extends to foreign companies as well, and Yahoo! was reported to be one of the earliest foreign signatories (Hu 2002).

In September 2005 as the new blog-control regime was being implemented, the Chinese government unleashed a second, broader set of regulations targeting all online news and information sites. According to the regulations governing any “Internet News Information Service,” websites are forbidden from posting content deemed to be “violating the basic principles as they are confirmed in the Constitution” or “jeopardizing the security of the nation, divulging state secrets, subverting the national regime or jeopardizing the integrity of the nation's unity.” (While blogs were not named, the regulations were widely interpreted afterwards by officials to include blog hosting services as well as BBS.) Websites purveying news and information are also forbidden from “inciting illegal assemblies, associations, marches, demonstrations, or gatherings that disturb social order” or “conducting activities in the name of an illegal civil organization” and “any other content prohibited by law or rules” (Hu 2002).

4 Delegating censorship to private business

How can the Chinese government possibly police millions of weblogs? That would be too costly to do directly and it has stopped trying. Rather, by 2005 the government had outsourced the censorship and policing of most Chinese weblogs to blog-hosting businesses. These businesses—including at least one U.S. company—in turn integrated censorship into their business processes in order to remain in the good graces of the authorities.

According to executives of blog-hosting companies, lists of forbidden words are maintained, updated and shared by service providers who then plug these keywords into their monitoring and/or filtering software (Xiao 2004b). In February 2006 the *Washington Post* obtained one such list from one of the blog-hosting companies. Journalist Philip Pan (2006c) observed: “Of 236 items on the list, 18 were obscenities. The rest were related to politics or current affairs.” Microsoft’s MSN Spaces Chinese-language blog-hosting service, launched in the summer of 2005, maintained a similar bad-word list, preventing users from posting those words in blog titles, and using it to flag potentially problematic blogs to staff attention. In exchange the Chinese government agreed not to block MSN blogs at the Internet Service Provider level, as is often done with many other popular international blog services like Wordpress.com and Blogger.com.

Blog-hosting companies are not given a “block list” by the government, but rather are left to their own devices to figure out how to monitor and censor user content to the government’s satisfaction. Tests conducted in late 2005 of four different Chinese language blog hosting services run by Chinese companies conducted showed that each company had come up with a slightly different censorship method. On Bokee, at the time China’s largest domestic blog-hosting site with 3.2 million bloggers, blogs containing mention of the banned Falun Gong religious movement and other politically sensitive subjects such as Tibetan independence were deleted by company administrators at speeds ranging between 24 hours and one week. Sina.com, one of China’s largest and most well-established web portals which includes a fast-growing blog-hosting service, removed blog posts containing sensitive content from a test blog within hours. Blogcn used an automated censorship system preventing the user from posting certain phrases altogether (see Fig. 1); and while other politically sensitive content was successfully posted, the entire test blog was deleted after approximately two months. The DoNews blogging service similarly prevented the user from publishing posts containing politically sensitive phrases such as “Falun Gong;” other posts containing politically sensitive content on Taiwan and Tibetan independence got through, but the entire blog was rendered inaccessible within 24 hours. A Shanghai-based blogging service, Blogbus, took a different approach: while posts containing sensitive phrases were allowed to be published, the system’s keyword software would replace the offending phrases with an “*” in place of each character in the banned phrase.

Thus the Chinese government seems relatively unconcerned with the detailed means to “manage” user content as long as the end result is successful. According to blog hosting company executives speaking on condition of anonymity, “success” is measured on the company’s end by a decrease in the number of phone calls received from various government departments complaining about content. When the frequency of calls increases, companies know they need to tighten controls further in order to avoid trouble.

5 MSN spaces: Foreign censorship compliance

Tests of Microsoft’s Chinese edition of MSN Spaces conducted in December 2005 showed a combination of automated and manual censorship. Users were automatically prevented

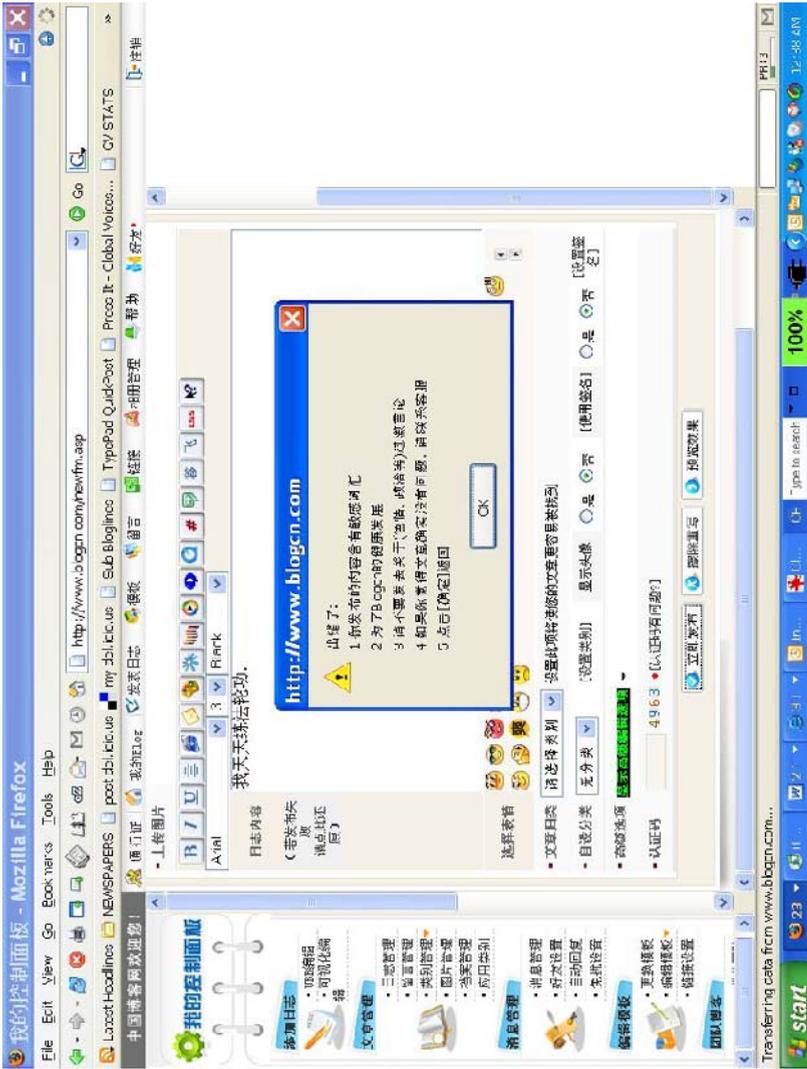


Fig. 1 Error message on Blogcn admin page upon trying to post text saying “I practice Falun Gong every day.”: “1. The content you have submitted contains sensitive terms; 2. For the sake of Blogcn’s healthy development; 3. Please do not use inflammatory language (sexually explicit, political, etc.); 4. If you believe your document truly has no problems, please contact customer support.” (Screenshot taken December 2005)

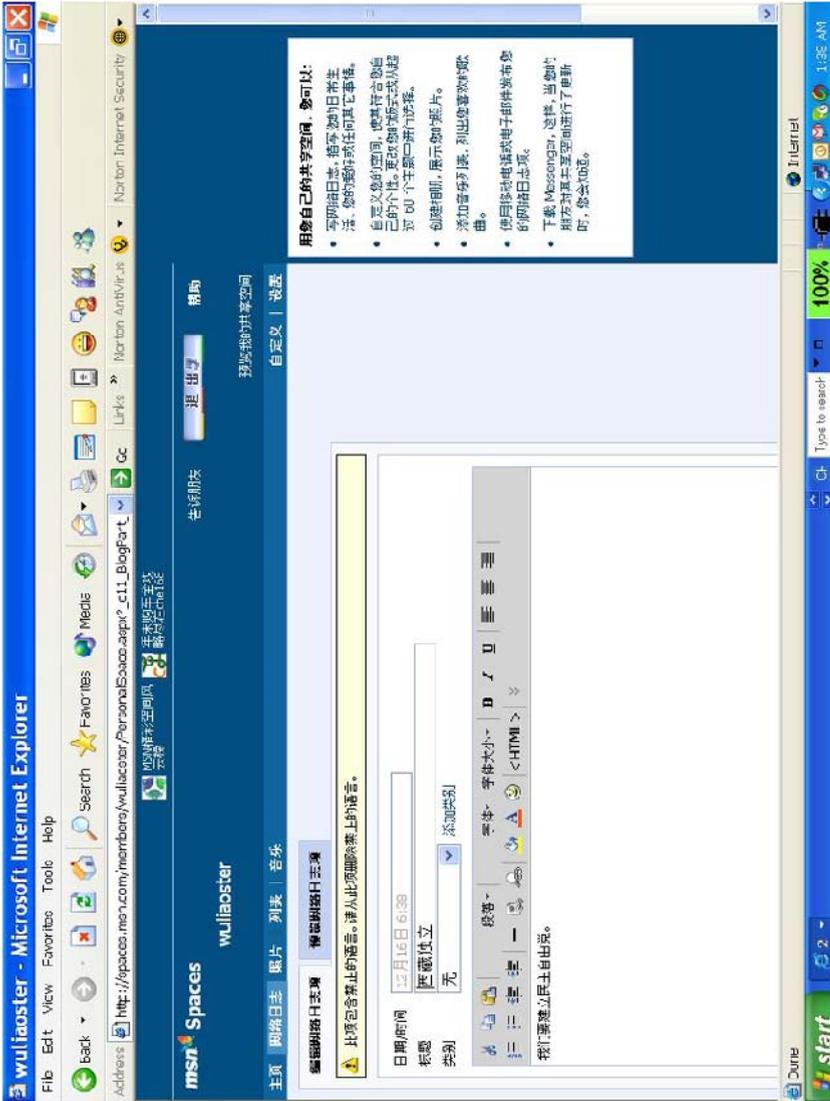


Fig. 2 MSN Spaces Censorship. Error message: “This item contains forbidden language. Please remove the forbidden language from this item.” (Screenshot taken December 2005)

from posting politically sensitive words such as “Falun Gong,” “Tiananmen incident” and “Tibetan independence” in the titles of individual blog posts. Efforts to save such posts generated the error message: “This item contains forbidden language. Please remove the forbidden language from this item” (see Fig. 2.) It was possible to post such “forbidden language” in the body of blog posts. However, roughly 48 hours after the test blog containing politically sensitive phrases was created in mid-December 2005, the entire blog was no longer accessible (the original URL, <http://spaces.msn.com/wuliaoster> now redirects to: <http://spaces.msn.com/wuliaoster/AccessDenied.aspx?space=wuliaoster>). It is important to note that the inaccessible blog was moved or removed at the server level, on servers inside the United States, and that the blog was rendered inaccessible from the United States as well as from China. This means that the action was not taken by Chinese authorities responsible for filtering and censoring the Internet for Chinese viewers, but by MSN staff at the level of the MSN servers.

Then at the very end of December 2005, Microsoft’s blog-censorship practices exploded into the public spotlight. The blog of Chinese news researcher Zhao Jing, writing under the pseudonym Michael Anti, was taken down from MSN Spaces servers on December 30th.

In 2005 Zhao had become one of China’s edgiest journalistic bloggers, often pushing at the boundaries of political acceptability. He had started blogging on MSN spaces in August 2005 after his original blog hosted by the Scotland-based company Blog-City.com was blocked by Chinese ISP’s. In December Zhao used his blog to speak out when propaganda authorities cracked down on *Beijing News*, a relatively new tabloid with a national reputation for exposing corruption and official abuse. The editor and deputy editors were fired and more than 100 members of the newspaper’s staff walked out in protest. Zhao covered the crackdown extensively on his blog, discussing behind-the-scenes developments, supporting the walkout and calling for a reader boycott of the newspaper. Microsoft told the *New York Times* that MSN Spaces staff deleted Zhao’s blog “after Chinese authorities made a request through a Shanghai-based affiliate of the company.”

Public outcry and criticism of Microsoft’s action was so strong in the United States that by late January, Microsoft changed its Chinese blog censorship policy. Called to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives in February to explain its collaboration with Chinese government censorship requirements, a senior Microsoft executive outlined the company’s effort to provide transparency while still complying with Chinese censorship requirements: Blog content would only be removed or filtered in response to a “legally binding notice from the government,” access to that content would only be blocked to users in the country issuing the order (geo-filtering), and users would be notified why content is blocked (Krumholtz 2006).

6 Impact and nature of censorship

Thanks to China’s political environment, unlike in the United States there is no cohesive “A-list” of influential Chinese political bloggers, or at least not one that is easily tracked and documented. In 2005 bloggers who posted politically sensitive content found themselves frequently having to move their blogs: leaving one blog host and starting a new blog with a new web address hosted by a different service. A Guangzhou-based blogger who writes under the pen name Wozy, moved his blog five times in 2005 (Penenberg 2005). Censorship appeared to occur most often when bloggers in some way advocated organized political action. After police gunned down protesting villagers in Southern China, Sichuan-based blogger Wang Yi posted the text of a petition condemning the crackdown and likened it to

the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. (Wang had only recently created a new blog after his original site was taken down by another blog hosting service approximately one month before.) Wang's blog host, Bokee, deleted the letter less than 12 hours after he had posted it (Pan 2005). Then Wang merely posted the title of the petition and names of the petitioners, and this was visible for several days. However by December 22nd Bokee had shut down Wang's blog entirely (Radio Free Asia 2005). In an interesting twist, Wang wrote that he hired a lawyer, who took some kind of legal action which caused Bokee to restore his blog. The details of what happened are not clear. The posts that caused his blog to be shut down remained deleted from the restored blog.

Even while Chinese bloggers are willing to talk about censorship and its underlying causes, Chinese blog-hosting companies and others with power to negotiate with authorities have not seen fit to resist or push directly against censorship requirements. Chinese bloggers and blog-hosting businesses themselves have generally viewed censorship as part of the necessary tradeoff required for online speech, as the following section will demonstrate.

7 Chinese bloggers' self-perceptions: Glass half full

For the most part, Chinese bloggers were surprised by the outrage and attention Anti's take-down generated abroad. Despite a situation that looks rather dire and oppressive from the perspective of people who live in Western democracies, outsiders are surprised to discover that many Chinese bloggers rankle at the Western media's focus on censorship of blogs, to the exclusion of many other—often much more subtle—positive accomplishments of the Chinese blogosphere. While not denying that censorship is an issue, many Chinese bloggers hold the view that the real story going on in the Chinese blogosphere is not one of oppressed victims who are waiting to be liberated. It is a story of tenacious optimists, slowly and patiently pushing back the boundaries, believing that in the end, history is on their side.

In November 2005, a group of bloggers involved with one of China's earliest group blogs, CNblog.org, organized the first-ever Chinese bloggers' conference in Shanghai. The event was videocast on the web, and people all around China and around the world were invited to join the discussions via live online chat. Despite the fact that some of the attendees have been subject to censorship and others were running blog-hosting services that engage in censorship, the gathering was not a meeting about censorship and limitations, but celebration of new possibilities.

CNBlog founder Isaac Mao in his opening keynote talked about the power of many small voices. "In the past, you could only share information with society in the structure given to you by authorities," he said. "We want ways to share information freely." One blogger who writes under the name "Zuola" described his blog as a personal platform for his own ideas—a platform that was not possible for people like himself prior to the advent of the blog in China. Blogger Chen Xuer said he started blogging and reading blogs because he wanted "to hear the truth and speak the truth." An especially impassioned speaker was Shanghai educator Zhuang Xiuli, who believes that blogs and social media tools may potentially play a role in reforming China's ossified education system. She said that even some education ministry officials are blogging in an effort to share and exchange information in a better and more open way than before.

When the meeting was over, several bloggers expressed annoyance that Western media reporters covering the meeting seemed interested only in the censorship issue. After some bloggers complained about their experiences being interviewed by the BBC after the conference, Wang Jianshuo wrote: "BBC is trying to find piece of information, filter it and create

an exciting picture for people in the “civilized” world The reason I was not comfortable with the interview is not talking about censorship. The problem is, I don’t want to be put into a condition that there is a pre-set conclusion and my role is just to act as a victim in the story and confirm it” (Wang 2005).

Thus it was not entirely surprising that discussion in the February 2006 U.S. Congressional hearings of what Americans can or should do to decrease censorship of Chinese bloggers led to bemusement among Chinese bloggers. Blogger Zhao Jing, a.k.a. Michael Anti, whose censorship experience had created the uproar leading to Congressional hearings, wrote an impassioned open letter titled: “The Freedom of Chinese Netizens Is Not Up To The Americans.” “When the US Congress proposes Internet freedom of information legislation,” he wrote, “this is truly treating the freedom of the Chinese netizens as maids that they can dress up as they see fit.” He argued that freedom of speech can only be achieved by Chinese people themselves (Zhao 2006).

Soon after the MSN’s deletion of Zhao’s blog, an essay by a blogger named Chiu Yung circulated in the Chinese blogosphere, arguing that MSN did the right thing by “sacrificing” him. If it hadn’t, reasoning went, the entire MSN Spaces service would become unavailable to all Chinese bloggers, and that would be a greater loss. He too believed that Chinese people have only themselves to blame for censorship, lamenting: “Chinese people devalue other Chinese people”. The comments thread on Chiu’s original blog post is long, with heated debate over what he had written. One wrote: “The world is getting flatter but the great wall is getting thicker.”

Hong Kong blogger Roland Soong, a close follower of the Chinese blogosphere, makes the harsh observation that: “the more important thing is that there is next to zero discussion about any issues related to Google, MSN and Yahoo inside China! These are regarded as simply western exercises in self-absorption, self-indulgence and self-flagellation, and completely alien to the Chinese situation.” In January and February 2006 when censorship in China was a hot topic in the U.S. blogosphere and press, a much hotter topic of conversation in the Chinese blogosphere was a lawsuit popularly known in China as “The Steamed Bun Case,” when film director Chen Kaige (best known in the West for “Farewell to My Concubine”) sued blogger Hu Ge for intellectual property violation after Hu made a silly spoof of Chen’s movie, “The Promise” (known in the West as “Master of the Crimson Armor”).

Will a critical mass of Chinese bloggers and Internet users ever be willing to openly defy censorship? One must also keep in mind that the people blogging online are the most inclined to view their glass as half full as opposed to half empty when it comes to personal freedoms: they are the educated urban elites who have benefited more than any other segment of the Chinese population from the past 20 years of economic reforms. There would need to be a much more profound and acute offline crisis for this group of people to find it worth risking the online and offline freedoms they have gained in exchange for the very uncertain gamble that they might be able to gain even more. This is especially the case when no viable national thought leader is able to emerge online under the current system of controls—and no viable alternative to the Chinese communist party has emerged offline either.

At the same time, one might ask whether a successful revolt against bad movies and apparatchik-approved culture, and the ability of schoolteachers to collaborate freely with one another through blogs, might be laying the long-term groundwork for successful political discourse. If so, the real cultural revolution that emerged in Chinese cyberspace in 2005 and 2006 could have long-term political consequences, even if in the short term it appeared to distract from political concerns.

8 Conclusion

What is and isn't possible in Chinese cyberspace mirrors the offline Chinese reality more than most outsiders realize. The “screens” and “fly-swatters” placed by the regime in front of the newly opened window have largely been successful in preventing a democracy infestation—especially in the short term.

In the longer term, the space for civil discourse is quietly deepening, thanks to blogs and other forms of online citizens' media. And it appears that every inch of that space is being actively and cleverly utilized. If this civil discourse in Chinese cyberspace continues to mature, deepen and develop, that leads to a number of intriguing questions: Over the course of a generation, will a new group of Chinese emerge who have grown up debating public affairs, engaging in critical thinking and respecting the sanctity of the individual in ways that were not possible before? Will this new generation who have grown up using blogs and other forms of online participatory media be much more ready for reasoned self-governance than the current generation?

If current trends continue, the answer could well be “yes,” though we must be mindful that the Internet and its conversations remain the realm of a minority. As of early 2006 only 8% of all Chinese were counted as Internet users. And according to the CASS 2005 study on urban Chinese Internet use: “a typical Internet user in China most likely is young, male, holding a job as a teacher or a white-collar worker with a high income, or a student” (Guo et al. 2005, p. v). This is hardly representative of the Chinese population as a whole, which is rural, educated at primary or high school level, with low incomes. For the Internet—let alone blogs—to become a truly effective vehicle for representative, democratic discourse, many more people must be brought online and a substantial digital divide would need to be breached.

The CASS Internet study also found something very interesting, which shows that by opening the Internet window for fresh air, the Chinese government may indeed have managed to benefit not only the people it governs but also its own legitimacy. Over half of the 2005 survey respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the following statements about the Internet: “People will have better knowledge of politics” (62.8%); “Higher officials will be more aware of the common people's views” (60.4%); “Government can better serve the people” (55.3%); and “People have more opportunities to criticize government policies” (54.2%). Fewer than half (45.1%—fewer than any of the other questions) agreed with the statement: “People can have more political power” (ibid p. 98).

The study points out that compared to survey results in other countries around the world under the auspices of the World Internet Project (WIP), the Internet has a more “significant” political impact in China than in other countries, both in terms of the relationship between the government and citizens as well as among people who share similar political interests. The authors conclude that “as Internet use becomes more popular in China, its impact on politics will be stronger” (ibid p. 100).

However we should be careful not to assume that the only possible “impact on politics” would be the simplistic process of one set of political power-holders being replaced by a new set of leaders (Lagerkvist 2005). When it comes to political change or democratization, the impact of the Internet and blogs is more likely to be gradual and subtle. Blogs are playing their part in creating an independent space for discourse, interaction, and collaboration. Physical distances are no longer the barrier they once were for people with common concerns and interests. All of these factors can be expected to contribute to major socio-political change in the long run.

If one combines the growing online space for private civic discourse provided by blogs with a functionally effective system of censorship and filtering, the result appears to be a

recipe for gradual, slow evolution—not democratic revolution. Outside observers of Internet and politics in China would do well to focus on the impact of blogs beyond the narrow scope of overt political protest and obvious political change. Most Western media attention focuses on those instances where bloggers clash with government censors or the web hosting companies who act as proxies for government censors. But to look only at these instances of conflict is to miss a great deal of what is really happening, much more quietly, under the surface. Powerful socio-political change can be expected to emerge as a result of the millions of online conversations taking place daily on the Chinese Internet: conversations that manage to stay comfortably within the confines of censorship. With each passing day, these conversations do their quiet part to free the collective Chinese mind.

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