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China and the internet

The party, the people and the power of cyber-talk

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At present the party has the upper hand. It is starting to sweat, though

"DO YOU know how serious a mistake you've made?" Yan Yuanzhang recalls an official asking him not long ago. Mr Yan had been summoned to Beijing's Internet Propaganda Management Office to talk about his websites. They were causing, he was told, the Communist Party to lose face. They were providing material that foreign media could use to attack China. They were illegal and must be closed down within 24 hours.

"Farewell, worker comrades," wrote Mr Yan in notices posted that day on his China-based websites, China Workers Net and Communist Net. Visitors could hear a lugubrious rendition of the communist anthem, the Internationale, through their computer speakers as they read. "Whether there is any hope of starting again, heaven knows." He says now that he will relaunch one of the two sites on May 1st, this time on a server in Taiwan.

It is remarkable that the websites lasted as long as they did. Mr Yan, who is not a party member, launched them on May 1st last year to mark Labour Day. The aim, he says, was to provide platforms for a "leftist" critique of China's embrace of "Dickensian capitalism". They did not, as he tried to explain to the city government, attack the party itself or its leaders. But they did provide something the party abhors: uncensored news about worker unrest. In September he launched a bulletin board on which visitors could directly post their comments. Messages complained about corruption, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the hardships of unemployed workers.

As Mr Yan talks, he gets a text message on his mobile phone. It is from Tan Jiaming, a university student in southern China who has been running a website of similar outlook, Revolutionary Marxism. It too, the message says, has been closed. The student had posted a notice entitled "Strongly Protest the Snuffing Out of the China Workers Website by the Beijing Authorities". He was summoned to hear a dozen officials threaten

him with expulsion from his university for backing Mr Yan.

Six years ago Bill Clinton described China's efforts to restrict the internet as "sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall". But as China's web-filtering technology has grown more sophisticated, and the ranks of its internet police have swelled, some have begun to wonder. A report in 2003 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace suggested that, despite the difficulties the internet posed to authoritarian regimes, it could also be used to fortify them. China, the authors concluded, had been "largely successful at guiding use" of the internet. At a congressional hearing in February on American companies involved in internet business in China, a Republican congressman, Christopher Smith, said the internet there had become "a malicious tool, a cyber sledgehammer of repression".

Some of the companies testifying at the hearing—Cisco, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!—deserved a grilling. Why, for instance, had Microsoft, at the request of Chinese officials, removed a popular site in December from its Chinese version of MSN Spaces, a service for personal diaries and blogs? Yahoo! too had questions to answer about reports that information it provided to the police about its e-mail services had helped put dissidents behind bars. More recently Reporters Without Borders, a human-rights group, said that a Hong Kong unit of Yahoo! had given the police a Chinese user's draft e-mails. These were then used as evidence at his trial for subversion, for which he received a four-year jail sentence. Yahoo! has condemned efforts to suppress freedom of speech, but says it must obey Chinese law.

For foreign companies, the internet business in China is certainly a moral minefield. But the internet should not be dismissed as merely an instrument of control for the Communist Party. In the past three years, China has seen far more extensive use of the internet and the rapid development of groups that share views online that are by no means always the same as the party's. The numbers of internet-connected computers have more than doubled since the end of 2002, to 45.6m, and internet-users have risen by 75%, to 111m. China now has more internet-users than any country but America, and over half of them have broadband (up from 6.6% at the end of 2002). Users of instant computer-to-computer messaging systems have more than doubled, to 87m. Blogs—online personal diaries, scarcely heard of three years ago—now number more than 30m. And search engines receive over 360m requests a day.

The spread of mobile telephony has been no less spectacular. At the end of last year China had 393m mobile-phone accounts, nearly 200m more than at the end of 2002 and more than any other country. If, as many believe, China's first third-generation mobile-network licence is to be awarded in the coming year, internet access at broadband speeds will become available on mobile handsets. And, crucially, many people in towns can now afford all this technology. China's economy in the past three years has been growing at around 10% a year, enriching a growing middle class that increasingly sees the internet as an aid to information-gathering, communication and entertainment. Even many students can afford laptops. In big cities, they congregate in cafés that offer free wireless access.

Moreover, the technological transformation is spreading far into the hinterland. Almost every county now has broadband. Internet cafés with high-speed connections are ubiquitous and cheap even in remote towns. Fixed-line internet access is still uncommon in rural homes. But in many parts of the countryside, it is possible to surf the internet at landline modem speeds using a mobile handset (though few peasants can afford to). With the government's encouragement, state-owned companies have poured quantities of money into the building of a telecoms infrastructure worthy of the rich world.

Keeping the genie half in the bottle

The government has also spent freely to keep its liberating side-effects under control. The committed few who are brave or foolhardy enough to use the internet to challenge the authorities now face a police force of some 30,000 online monitors, say foreign human-rights groups. They also say that China has jailed over 50 people for expressing views online or in text messages. Worried about the forces unleashed by rapid economic and

social change, China's leaders have stepped up their efforts in recent months to control not only the internet but other media too. A handful of outspoken newspapers have been closed and their editors sacked.

At February's congressional hearing, representatives of America's internet companies argued that their presence was helping to promote access to information by encouraging the internet's development in China. Jack Krumholtz of Microsoft said the Chinese people would be the principal losers if his company's internet services ceased in China. They would be denied, he said, "an important avenue of communication and expression". That was an exaggeration. Foreign companies help to spur competition. But it is Chinese companies—some of them listed on American stock exchanges—that in many respects, and often unwittingly, are transforming China faster.

Google's decision to set up a self-censored version of its search engine in China this year aroused a storm of criticism in America. But iResearch, a Shanghai-based market-analysis firm, says China's Baidu enjoys more than 56% of the search market; Google follows with less than a third, having been the leader three years ago. Popular features of Baidu's engine are its ability to link searches to related chat forums, and hunt for MP3 music files, most of them pirated.

Baidu's searches are not nearly as comprehensive as Google's. But self-censorship, both by Baidu and by Google in its new China-based engine, still allows information through that the party dislikes. For instance, news about the congressional hearing—ignored by China's print media—can be found on both. Entering the Chinese-character equivalents of the words "Congress America internet freedom" into Baidu produces three prominent results relating to the hearing. All are blogs. Two even contain advertisements with links to pornographic websites.

Google's engine in China produces more relevant results. But many are blocked by a firewall, the barrier between the internet in China and the rest of the world that filters out banned sites and those containing prohibited keywords. Curiously, it is the Chinese search engine with a more rigorous filtering system than Google's that provides the readiest access to uncensored information about the congressional hearing. For those who know English, the House of Representatives' website offers copies of evidence and a webcast of the entire proceedings. These are not blocked.

The firewall is porous. Imaginative users can find ways of searching for sensitive topics such as news about Falun Gong, a banned spiritual movement. In Google, entering the words "Falun Gong" will cause the entire results page to be blocked, but "FLG movement" will not. Many Chinese internet-users are well practised in configuring their internet browsers to route page requests through unblocked proxy servers outside China. These help bypass the firewall.

Blog-standard evasion

Blogs make the censors' work all the more difficult. China's fast-growing legions of bloggers know they must avoid taboo keywords, including those programmed into the Chinese version of MSN Spaces. If you enter any of those, the postings will not be shown or your attempt to set up a blog will be denied. But, as China's internet companies engage in fierce competition to draw blog traffic to their portals, few checks seem to be made about who is writing them. A blog can easily and quickly be set up on a Chinese portal, and no one asks for verifiable personal information. Bloggers often display postings that would make party censors shudder. Mr Tan, the student who used to run the Revolutionary Marxism website, has a blog on MSN Spaces that keeps up his campaign for workers' rights despite the demise of his own site and continued harassment by officials.

Human intervention is no less fallible than the firewall. In the middle of the huge open-plan newsroom of Sina Corporation in north-western Beijing, a score of censors sit in front of their screens. They are young employees whose job is to examine thousands of blogs and comments posted by internet-users on Sina's news items. It is a round-the-clock task, designed to find anything that could have got through the filters and might still offend the authorities.

Direct attacks on the party, its leaders or on the political system rarely get through (or at least, not for long). But that still allows room for far more vigorous debate on a range of social and economic issues than China has enjoyed before under Communist rule. According to Qian Hualin of the government-affiliated China Internet Network Information Centre, Chinese service-providers report that some 70% of their bandwidth is taken up with pirated music and films. That still leaves lots of room for discourse.

Even the party itself pays attention to the deluge of public comment. Eager to acquire some legitimacy, but anxious to avoid democracy, it is trying its hand at populism. The prime minister, Wen Jiabao, said last month that the government should listen "extensively" to views expressed on the internet. With few other ways of assessing the public mood, the internet is indeed a barometer, even though surveys suggest that users are hardly representative of the general population, being mainly young, better educated and male.

In 2003 many internet-users expressed outrage on bulletin boards over the beating to death in jail of just such a young, well-educated man who had been arrested for failing to carry the right identity documents. This led to the scrapping of a decades-old law giving the police sweeping powers to detain anyone suspected of staying without a permit in a place other than his registered home town. Later that year the commuting of a death sentence of a gang boss prompted a similar online furore. The Supreme Court retried the case and ordered his execution.

The knitting of a network

Guo Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences describes 2003 as a "milestone" in the development of the internet in China. During the outbreak early in the year of SARS, an often fatal respiratory disease, many people stayed at home and made extensive use of the internet to gather information and keep in touch. The government's efforts to block news of the outbreak collapsed as word spread by e-mail, computer and text message. By late 2004 home installation of broadband began to take off, and with it the growth of blogging, instant messaging and internet-based phone and video calls.

The party worries about any unregulated networking among ordinary people. It severely limits the activities of non-governmental organisations, even straightforwardly charitable ones. It ruthlessly suppresses organised dissent. But China's love affair with the mobile phone, text and instant messaging has helped people to form networks on a scale and with a speed that is beyond the party's ability to control. Windows Messenger, Microsoft's instant-messaging system, is one popular tool. But by far the biggest share of this market is enjoyed by a Chinese company, Tencent. Its messaging service, QQ, generates revenue by linking a free online system with mobile phones, for which users must pay.

The QQ service has helped Mr Yan retain some of his online network of contacts since the closure of China Workers Net and Communist Net. He replaced the two home pages with notices inviting anyone interested in staying in touch to join a QQ chat group called China Working Class Net. Members can hold discussions with dozens of people all at once. With webcams, some chatters can also see and hear each other. Some even go in for *luoliao*, naked chatting, which is causing the authorities and parents some concern. The government, however, seems to devote more resources to controlling politics on the internet than to controlling sex.

One frequently criticised aspect of China's internet development is that nationalist diatribes have a much better chance of getting past the censors than other political comment. But nationalism has also provided a convenient cover for experimenting with new forms of mobilisation. The power of instant messaging, for instance, became evident in April last year, when it was used to organise big anti-Japanese protests in several cities. In the build-up to the protests, Sina organised an online campaign aimed at demonstrating public opposition to Japan's bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Some 20m people submitted their names. Since starting a similar campaign a few weeks ago, Sina's rival, Sohu, has gathered more than 15m names. "It shows the power" of the internet, says Charles Chao, Sina's boss.

The government keeps issuing new rules to keep users of both the internet and mobile phones in line. Last September news portals were banned from publishing anything that might incite protests; anything issued in the name of any "illegal civil organisation" was also forbidden. According to news reports, the government plans this year to issue rules to require people buying pre-paid mobile phone cards to submit proof of identity: over half of China's mobile-phone accounts are not registered in any name, making it easy for criminals—or dissidents—to use them without being identified by the police. "The internet in China is a wild place, it's crazy," says Charles Zhang, head of Sohu. "I don't think it's monitored enough."

Catch me if you can

But the market is likely to prevail over restrictions. Limiting phone-card sales to just a few shops with the ability to process registration requirements would be a blow to mobile-phone companies and huge numbers of

private vendors who thrive on such business. It is hard to see how it could be enforced any more rigorously than, say, China's ban on the unauthorised reception of satellite signals. Illegal sales of satellite dishes and cable services offering uncensored foreign satellite channels are big underground businesses in urban China.

China's news portals, in their competition for traffic, will continue to test the limits of official tolerance. And in a competitive market few internet-café operators pay attention to government requirements that users' identities should be registered. An hour on a broadband connection in an internet café in a small town can cost as little as one yuan—about 13 cents.

Research by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences suggests the scale of the government's task. Over 20% of people surveyed in five Chinese cities last year said the internet had increased their contacts with others who shared their political interests—a far higher proportion than found in a similar survey conducted in America (8.1%) by collaborators in the investigation. Nearly half of the respondents said going online increased their contacts with people who shared their hobbies, compared with less than 20% in the United States (networked role-playing games, growing fast in popularity in China, may partly account for this). And nearly 63% agreed that the internet gave them greater opportunities to criticise the government.

"China is changing, it's improving," says Jack Ma, head of Alibaba, which last year took over the running of Yahoo!'s Chinese operations—for, despite an early start in China, Yahoo! has been elbowed aside by domestic rivals. "Ten years ago, 20 years ago, in Chairman Mao's time, if we came here to talk about these things [government censorship]," he begins. Then he puts an imaginary pistol to his head and, with a grin, fires it. That, of course, was when power just grew out of the barrel of a gun. Now it also grows out of the infinite, albeit virtual, barrels of the internet.

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