

The Internet as a Tool for Political Activism in China

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It is almost hard to imagine that not that long ago, hardly anyone knew what the Internet was, let alone how to develop tools like e-petitions to let someone in a country to which you have never been join in a campaign to demand the release of a human rights abused prisoner in another country to which you have never been.

The advent of the Internet and Information Technology has greatly altered the way societies are governed. Politicians and those in “power positions” depend on the communication of messages and ideas, and IT can be used to strengthen that power by affecting the “speed, destination, and anonymity of those communications” (Hachigian, 2003, p.56). Using IT to bolster a cause, whether it be for citizens or their state, can alter the outcome of a particular political race by changing the pace at which each side performs (Hachigian, 2003). It is important to remember, however, that technology is not the sole cause of political change, but it is a method through which people can affect change.

Hachigian suggests several ways in which the Internet and Information Technology can influence the way a state is governed. Smaller political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), dissenters, or concerned individuals can challenge those in power or their policies by widely disseminating information and more easily facilitating platforms through which supporters can organize. When information is freely available, it is possible to more easily gather facts with which to hold leaders accountable, especially when the mainstream media or other sources will not challenge the government. Dissenting groups can actually affect regime change by exploiting IT to highly publicize criticisms and share and organize information about gatherings and protest venues (Hachigian, 2003). As well, external pressure from foreign and international concerned parties can pressure governments to change their policies (Lai, 2003).

Politics in different countries have been affected by the IT explosion in different ways. In some Asian countries like North Korea, Myanmar, and Singapore, IT has minimally affected politics. In other Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and China, however, IT has strongly affected politics (Hachigian, 2003). The reverse is true, as well, especially in China.

Brief Background to Politics in China

The People's Republic of China, a one-party authoritarian state, has been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1949. The CCP controls all major government and military positions, as well as the media and security structures (Kalathil & Boas, 2003).

Beginning in the early 1990s, much capitalist activity helped to create a huge number of Chinese millionaires. At the same time, changes to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) led to more unemployment, with huge numbers of job seekers looking for better opportunities in the cities (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; also Katzman, 2005). Labour rights advocates assert that huge numbers of factory employees work in unsafe conditions. Peasant and worker strikes and other protests have occurred with increasing frequency (Kalathil & Boas, 2003).

Under these conditions, the Chinese government has encouraged the Internet as a method to improve economic activity and education, to assist more of the labour force. The government also realizes that the benefits of a more knowledge-based economy can raise the standard of living, which can lead to more citizen support (Kalathil & Boas, 2003).

However, much Western literature suggests that the government is fearful of foreign and domestic threats to its control. Foreign fears come in the examples of "backdoor" software and hardware, including identifying tracking features of operating systems like Windows 98 (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002), and suspicions of weakened U.S. encryption software in deals with the U.S. National Security Agency. The concern is that these hidden tools or "time bombs" would be used to the detriment of China (Xiaofang & Aidong, 1999, as cited in Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

Internally, the government is fearful of social unrest and anarchy, based on the experiences of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The current Chinese leaders act more conservatively with political than with economic reforms, which has sometimes led to strong reactions against perceived threats to stability. The government has initiated a mass crackdown on crime (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). It seems that China's authoritarian government has reformed little in recent years.

There has, however, been some change in the political sphere, suggesting the beginnings of a civil society, which is considered a foundation for democratic politics

(Yang, 2003). Social organizations have reformed, and become more active (although many are state-led); and social organizations and ordinary citizens have more independence from the state than in previous decades (Davis, Kraus, Naughton, & Perry, 1995). Pei (2001) also refers to some political changes: improvements in state and local legislatures, and reforms to the legal system.

Also, reforms in the media have allowed for more of a public venue for discussion (Lynch, 1999). Earlier this year, the State Council Informatization Office announced changes in its e-governance, requiring all governmental agencies to provide information on their websites relating to administrative affairs and other areas of concern to the public by the end of 2005. Until now, most sites have only provided photos of government officials. It is expected that citizens will be able to use these channels to voice their opinions and ideas (Fu, 2005), albeit these are officially governmentally regulated venues.

Pei (2001) suggests that such reforms have not affected the government's control of state power, however, limiting grassroots efforts in self-government. Kalathil and Boas (2003) suggest that much of current governmental reform actually stems from within the government itself, not from grassroots pressure.

China's political future is uncertain, considering events like China's recent accession to the WTO and related economic reforms, the potentially inflated Yuan, huge increases in its military defense budgets (Katzman, 2005), as well as a marked increase in nationalism (Katzman, 2005) and increasingly vocal social movements. What kind of social and political effects are we seeing now, and what will we see in the future from its current unstable climate? Since many government leaders come from economics and engineering backgrounds, how are the Internet and Information Technology being affected? How are the people who use these technologies being affected? What will the future of the Internet and IT in China look like?

While all of these considerations are important, to fully discuss them would be beyond the capabilities of this short paper. Therefore, I will focus on the people who use the Internet and Information Technology in their political activism – cyber activists. How does the Chinese view of political issues and the media affect the activists' use of the Internet as a tool? Does this view conflict with the much discussed Western view? What

tools do cyber activists use in China? How do these tools compare with those used elsewhere? What does the future hold for cyber activists, given the Chinese views of political activism, the present Chinese government, and current user knowledge of Information Technology? To begin, I discuss the history of the Internet and IT in China, and the background for cyber activists.

Internet and Information Technology in China

Since China officially became online in 1993 (Kalathil & Boas, 2001), the Internet revolution has exploded from about 1,600 users in 1994 (Du, 1999) to about 94 million users by the end of 2004, a growth of 28% over the previous year (China Internet Network Information Centre [CNNIC], 2005).

A CNNIC survey showed that most Internet users are men (60.9%), and most are below 30 years old. One third are students, 12 percent are engineering professionals, nine percent are enterprises managers, and nine per cent come from business and service sectors. Two-thirds use the Internet from home, 40% access it from offices, 24% from Internet cafés, and 18% from schools (CNNIC, 2005).

The Internet is mostly used for gaining information and for entertainment. Eighty-six percent of users most frequently use e-mail, two-thirds use search engines, and 62% read news. Ninety-eight per cent use the Internet as their main tool for obtaining information, and 74% access news information (CNNIC, 2005).

While these numbers give an interesting statistical look into the demographics of the Internet in China, they do not provide much insight into social and political implications, as the Internet and IT pose a unique challenge in China. On the one hand, the technology offers attractive commercial advantages, which the government strongly encourages (Pomfret, 2000; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; also Du, 1999). On the other hand, it can give rise to dissent, and may threaten the government by allowing access to new information and a venue for discussion and potential organization. The government seeks to control as much as it encourages the Internet.

Hachigian (2003) suggests that controlling the Internet's political potential may also decrease its commercial value. However, recent incidents are increasingly supporting an opposite view. For example, a BBC News article wrote that Microsoft has decided to "manage the reality of operating in countries around the world", in the words of a

Microsoft spokesperson, and “self-censor” words like *freedom*, *democracy*, and *demonstration* in Chinese web logs, *blogs* (“Microsoft censors,” 2005). From this, one easily concludes that big business is not concerned with human rights and freedom of expression when they get in the way of making a profit. China can keep on trucking!

Since the government feels the need to sustain economic growth in order to keep its hold on power, it is investing huge amounts of money to develop and promote IT infrastructure. From its initial beginnings providing Internet protocol (IP) connections between government offices and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), to the 1996 inception of the Steering Committee on National Information Infrastructure which coordinated and controlled the limited number of Internet networks, and the Committee’s 1998 merger into the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the government is tightly controlling the way in which this is done (Kalathil & Boas, 2001).

As the Internet continues to develop in China, however, its interactive nature provides opportunities for users to challenge this control. The Chinese government is known for giving swift and harsh punishments to those who challenge the control and participate in “subversive” behaviour or otherwise threaten its security. The existence of the Internet itself does not threaten the Chinese government; however, when it is used by individuals or organizations inside China for “subversive” purposes, the government objects (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

The first person convicted of subversion was Lin Hai, a Chinese software entrepreneur. Accused of giving 30,000 e-mail addresses to an American-based pro-democracy online publication called *VIP Reference*, he was sentenced in 1998 to two years in a Shanghai prison (Du, 1999).

More and more, dissidents and even ordinary citizens who express controversial opinions on the Internet are being detained and punished. In a 2004 report, Amnesty International recorded 54 people who had been detained or imprisoned for sharing their beliefs or information through the Internet, a 60% increase from 2002. Those charged were participating in or initiating activities like signing online petitions, calling for reform and an end to corruption, planning to set up a pro-democracy party, publishing “rumours about SARS”, communicating with foreign groups, opposing the persecution of

the Falun Gong spiritual movement, and calling for a review of the crackdown on the pro-democracy uprising in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Amnesty International, 2004).

Several reports assert that China has the most tightly censored Internet in the world. While considered too complex to give an accurate account (Zittrain & Palfrey, 2005), authorities' efforts focus on two main methods of control: filtering content, as all communication passes through the previously-mentioned routers; and promoting "self-censorship" through laws, policing (both paid and "voluntary"), and punishment (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). To further control information that the government felt could harm the country, the Ministry for the Information Industry (MII) announced on March 20, 2005, that all China-based websites and blogs had to be registered, providing the full identity of the site owner, by June 30, 2005 (Reporters Without Borders, 2005), although Isaac Mao, a technologist, investor, and one of the first Chinese bloggers, says that this does not apply to sub-domains, only to those on independent servers (MacKinnon, 2005). The government has also developed a new method, *Night Crawler*, to monitor sites in real time, and block those sites which fail to comply with the regulations (Reporters Without Borders, 2005). Even as they greatly expand the Internet infrastructure, the government continues to make sure that all cables are routed through government gateways, which allow censors to block objectionable websites and monitor data (China Daily, 2005).

Zittrain and Palfrey (2005) determined that filtering happens mainly at the initial network level, although some Internet service providers also use their own systems. In addition to the previously mentioned Microsoft blog example, popular Chinese search engines also filter content by keywords such as *Taiwan*, *Tibet*, *democracy*, *dissident*, *Falun Gong*, and *human rights* (Amnesty International, 2004), and remove some results from their lists. Google has also joined their ranks, admitting to removing some blocked news stories from their results within China, although they say this is to improve users' Internet experience (Knight, 2004). Zittrain and Palfrey also found that major Chinese blog service providers filter posts by keywords or delete them entirely. Some searches are blocked by China's filtering, however, and not by the search engines. In 2003, the Ministry of Culture stated that by 2005, all Internet Cafés would be required to install tracking software (AFP, 2003), and keep information on file for 60 days (Zittrain & Palfrey, 2005).

In addition to its extensive filtering system, Zittrain and Palfrey discuss China's extremely complex system of rules and regulations which control what gets published online and its accessibility. Some of the laws discuss regulation of the media, protecting "state secrets", controlling ISPs, and the operation and control of Internet cafés. It seems that Chinese citizens do not have rights to privacy in this context. (For an extensive discussion of Internet filtering in China, see Zittrain & Palfrey, 2005; also Tsui, 2001.)

Chinese versus Western Views on Internet Censorship and Control

Most of the articles on censorship and freedom of expression in China are written from the Western perspective, and focus on what they consider gross abuses of human rights (Wong, 2003). Much of Western literature discusses the Internet as a threat to the Chinese government, as opposed to a resource (Li, 2004), except in the economic realm. However, the Chinese perspective presents a different picture.

China has more and more access to new forms of media. No longer do they rely on the government's China Central Television (CCTV) daily news show as their sole source of information. Satellite TV, cable TV, and the Internet all bring in alternative perspectives (Li, 2004).

Li discusses the role of the Internet press as an instrumental source to spread and gather new information. He states that news outlets, including those based in Taiwan and the U.S., do not need to have approval from the government's propaganda departments. Zittrain and Palfrey (2005) note that while most American media sites like CNN, MSNBC, and ABC are mostly available in China, the BBC remains blocked. Chinese news outlets like China Daily and Xinhua continue to publish only officially sanctioned information (Reporters Without Borders, 2004). Given all of these various sources of information, however, a survey directed by Liang (2003) of urban Chinese citizens observed that Chinese interviewees trust domestic media more than foreign media.

Does the literature present a truly accurate Chinese view on censorship, the media, and the Internet? Perhaps, but Li (2004) shares several ways whereby the media can influence our perception of others. The media can create a narrative framework that affects our "perception and subsequent responses to issues and events" (Li, 2004, p. 256). Also, the media can give "relevant and timely information concerning the subject" (Li, 2004, p. 256). He shares the example of the 16th Party Congress of November 2002,

where the government attempted to immortalize their Three Represents Thought theory to the same level as the theories of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Thought, and Deng Theory. Propagandists bombarded the nightly TV programs and newspapers with official words and quotations from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In an evening news program, the local officials were seen risking their own lives to save others' lives and public property during a threat of flood, all because they had studied the important Three Represents Thoughts theory. These sources all used traditional means of political mobilization – using the same people to share exactly the same information using exactly the same words.

Using these tools in the current Internet age, is the government successful in influencing its citizens, especially given the fact that they trust domestic more than foreign media? Perhaps not in this particular case, but as the government has had much practise in using these techniques, it would be difficult to gauge the complete extent of its influence, especially with regards to Internet control. The advent of the Internet may have allowed for a more diversified source of information, potentially leading to a weakening in government influence on people's thoughts, but the increasingly strong controls still have an untold effect.

The government's influence notwithstanding, there does not seem to be consensus on what the Chinese view is towards Internet control and censorship. Liang's survey found that urban Chinese feel they have more opportunities to express their political views, and more opportunities to criticize government policies (Liang, 2003). In fact, Liang's survey found that 90% felt that the Internet should have at least some management and control, however the top areas were pornography, violence, and junk messages. Politics was quite low, with 12-13% of interviewees feeling politics should be controlled. Li (2004) notes, however, that the Internet still connects only a fraction of the population, most of whom may not be interested in politics.

One posting on a blog website questions why there is so much emphasis on politics and Chinese discussing politics and free speech, when most of the Chinese population has different needs and does not have the time, energy, money, and education to consider discussing these things (Lemcke-Hoong, 2004). An interesting thought that could explain the lack of interest in politics. However, the freedom of expression called for by many people does not automatically equal discussing solely politics. A further

analysis of the foreign media's fascination with Chinese politics and freedom of expression would be good; however, that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Guo Liang (RAND, 2002) clarified his findings regarding the Chinese view towards Internet control to say that the amount of control itself was not the issue. The more important issue was the subject of the censoring, and how much the user needed the content. For example, there was major uproar from users and businesses when China blocked the search engine Google, leading the government to back down (Deans, 2002). Liang suggests that the blocked content's value was more important than whether the government actually participates in blocking. When pro-democracy sites are shut down, for example, there is no similar uproar.

To give some further background into Chinese Internet user's views on the government and censorship, Wong (2003) states that the vast majority of users are not pro-Western activists wanting to overthrow the government. In fact, many rely on the government for their livelihood, and are very nationalistic. It is quite possible that they feel a safe and stable authoritarian government is preferred, exemplifying the Hobbesian state where "personal freedom is exchanged for a sense of safety and security of the greater whole" (Tsui, 2002, Culture Shock section, para. 6).

Given the government's propaganda, the reliance of Chinese on the government, the potential lack of awareness of blocked material (although this is debatable – see Hung, 2005), and the fact that the Internet is still only available to an elite few, it can get complicated to determine the genuine views of Chinese on Internet control and censorship.

Cyber activists in China

Kirby (2002) states that since the violent crackdown on pro-democracy advocates in Tiananmen Square in 1989, political dissent is limited to people outside of China, and a few individuals within China, who are frequently penalized. Considering the low proportion of Chinese citizens interested in politics, it is interesting how much media attention is given to political dissidents. In China, they are degraded (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2002), but in Western media, they are heralded as beacons of hope for a culture that is in desperate need of human rights.

Taking into consideration the differing Western versus Chinese views of censorship in China, what are the issues that concern Chinese activists, defined by Denning (2001, p.241) as those who participate in “normal, nondisruptive use of the Internet in support of an agenda or cause”? What kinds of goals do they have, and what methods do they use to achieve them? Do they differ from Western methods?

Smith, Kearns, and Fine (2005, p. 4) categorize actions used by North American activists into four groups:

- Collaboration: many people working together on one activity or event;
- Communication: talking with and among interested individuals;
- New media/content development: creating and distributing original news;
- Organizing/collective action: coordinating the activities of many activists and supporters

While these methods are freely used in Western countries, the Chinese environment may necessitate a different approach. To further differentiate among the methods, they can be divided into two approaches: technical and social. To begin, I will discuss technical tools used by activists.

In order for the technical tools to be effective, Tsui (2001) suggests that they need to have a “high degree of accessibility, user-friendliness and continuity” (p. 32). The ordinary user should be able to consistently use these relatively easy methods. Tsui discusses five methods used to counter the Chinese government’s control: proxy servers, anonymous networks, cybersleuthing, encryption, and e-mail spamming.

A proxy server refers to the intermediate agent used to make a connection to the Internet, allowing blocked sites to be viewed. Instead of the user directly requesting a website, which would be blocked, the proxy server requests the website. As the proxy server is not hampered by restrictions, the website is not blocked. Liang (2003) discovered that almost 50% of Chinese Internet users had used proxy servers.

However, an evaluation of the tool reflects some problems. It is not always easily accessible. As *free*, *proxy* and *proxy server* are some of the top search engine keywords (Gutman, 2002), users can be directed towards the same popular proxy servers. Unfortunately, overuse can slow down the speed and make the proxy useless. Too many people using the same proxy increases the load, and the speed of a proxy is dependent on

the load. Also, it is possible to block the proxy server, although it can be easy to switch to another server using particular programs. However, if it is easy for the user to switch, then it would be easy for the authorities to also discover the new server. In fact, Ma (2005) states that the “average online lifespan of proxy servers in China is a mere 30 minutes” (p. 8). In addition to these concerns, Chen (2000) states that the authorities are also developing fake proxies, which could monitor the activity and gather information on the user.

Continuity of the service is clearly a challenge. Also, Tsui (2001) suggests that there is no financial incentive to run a proxy server. Gutman discusses the use of Triangle Boy, a product of SafeWeb and the Voice of America (VOA), which thousands of Chinese used. Chinese users would get a new e-mail listing of Triangle Boy servers every day. However, Tkacik (2004) said that the program was eventually terminated because of inadequate funding and over caution in managing the contract. VOA switched to developing “safe-haven Web sites,” which are now censored by authorities.

In a recently established workaround, Isaac Mao has developed an “Adopt a Blog” program in response to the pressure from the government to register independent websites and blogs. Internet server hosts outside of China who have blog services on their own server space are invited to host Chinese blogs (Mao, 2005). It will be interesting to see how such a tool will assist in promoting freedom of expression.

As another counter measure, anonymous networks are also used. These networks apparently give privacy and let the user surf anonymously. However, these can also be blocked, although Zittrain and Palfrey (2005) discovered that the majority were almost fully accessible within China. Tsui notes that the good and easy-to-use ones are not free, though. As the vast majority of users do not purchase items online and are quite concerned with providing sensitive credit card information online (Liang, 2003), this is a prohibitive option.

Cybersleuthing is another tool used. Ball (2003) describes cybersleuthing as exploiting the Internet’s capabilities to acquire revealing information on people, and track them down. Of course, these capabilities are not limited to people, and the uses can be quite wide-ranging. Tsui discusses that there is more and more software being developed

that seeks undesirable content, so moderators are able to censor material themselves. This tool can be used for bulletin board systems (BBS) which are considered hard to regulate.

This discussion, however, supports the aims of the Chinese government, which is to eliminate “objectionable” information. If cybersleuthing is used by BBS monitors to fulfill the government’s desires, then this cannot be considered a tool used by cyber activists in achieving their goals. In fact, it achieves the opposite of their goals.

In addition to cybersleuthing, Tsui also discusses encryption as a tool for activists. While normal e-mails are not secure, encrypted messages provide more privacy. However, Internet users in general are not very concerned about privacy on the Internet (McCullagh & Sager, 2001). In China, one could hypothesize that this is also the case, since there does not seem to be mass uproar over eroding privacy laws like registering independent websites and blogs (“China reportedly to shut down,” 2005); however, there is not much research to support or refute this claim. Without much regard to privacy, awareness of security measures is quite low and since the software is harder to use, not many people install it. Opposite to the situation with proxy servers, fewer users of encryption software makes it less useful (Tsui, 2001).

Another counter method is e-mail spamming. Tsui (2001) describes the examples of underground newsletters *VIP Reference*, *Tunnel*, and *CND*. *VIP Reference*, begun in 1998, provides information and news from most Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Chinese magazines. Its aim is to freely give uncensored information to Chinese people. Information is gathered in China, but anonymously e-mailed to the U.S., where it is then distributed to thousands of Chinese e-mail addresses, originating from a different e-mail address each time. Its website is blocked by the Chinese authorities, however, although they have a difficult time blocking the e-newsletter itself. Therefore, this method is only somewhat effective – the newsletter seems to work, but the website postings do not. Wong (2002) states that the government is now arresting those who are caught with a copy of the newsletter. He further observes that the use of Internet cafés to check web-based e-mail, thus avoiding their material being traced to their home computers, has been rendered less safe due to increases in café monitoring.

Tunnel was another newsletter that published dissident and “objectionable” writings. It was shut down in 1998, when the publishers were arrested (“China Beefs Up Net Crackdown”, 1998).

China News Digest International (CND), established in 1989, was the first online Chinese magazine. It is based in the U.S., and aims to publicize news about China (CND, 2005). According to Tsui (2001), the website is blocked within China, so it is not likely to be very effective for political activism within China.

Wong (2002) also discusses the use of peer-to-peer applications such as Freenet or Gnutella, which allow people to directly share documents over the Internet, without the need for central computer servers. However, these tools are prohibitively difficult to implement for the average user.

While providing some degree of ability to circumvent the system, most of these tools pose enormous problems for cyber activists. What then, have they been able to do? And what kinds of social tools have been used?

Given the low number of political activists and high degree of censorship and dissident detainment, much of their inner workings have been quite underground. This does not mean that the groups are not active. On the contrary, many are highly publicized in foreign media, and have developed relationships with outside groups, as best as they are able (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). Given Smith, Kearns, and Fine’s (2005) descriptions of action categories, namely collaboration, communication, new media development, and organizing/collective action, Chinese activists’ efforts are likely reinforced from the outside, and are propelled to continue.

Chase and Mulvenon (2002) observe that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has never put up with the formation of any organizations that exist outside of its power. Jiang Zemin even officially stated in 1998 that unsanctioned political organizations would be banned (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). While it has not been able to suppress the few actions and movements of Falun Gong and the China Democracy Party (CDP), there is no threat to its authoritarian regime.

While to thoroughly discuss all Chinese political dissident activities and tools would be beyond the scope of this paper, I will examine the specific story of the China Democracy Party (CDP), and its use of the Internet and IT. Human Rights Watch (2000)

thoroughly documents the CDP's history from its inception in 1998 to its dramatic clampdown 18 months later. A diverse group of political activists from all over the country joined together to try to acquire the formal legal registration of an opposition political party, for the first time since the People's Republic of China's establishment in 1949. The government, however, did not agree to the group's objectives, and all known members were detained, 34 of whom were charged with attempted subversion and given up to 13 years in prison. Four members fled the country. Other members who did not leave are living under close surveillance and are no longer openly active.

According to Human Rights Watch, the goals of the CDP were to have multiparty democracy in China, as well as respect for human rights (see Human Rights Watch, 2000, for a full declaration from the CDP), although they used a moderate approach and openly organized their actions. In fact, Chase and Mulvenon (2002) state that the group was not against the CCP and were even willing to work with them to achieve their goals. The CCP, however, felt it was a group that undermined its main principles and domination of power. Most of the CDP were experienced dissidents, and some were former political prisoners. They had skills in applying modern methods of communication and strategies, and were keen to test the CCP's publicized commitments to improve respect for human rights.

In June 1998, three of the group's founders used the opportunity of U.S. President Bill Clinton's state visit to China to announce its inaugural meeting. At that time, the Chinese government announced its commitment to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Based on this treaty's inclusions on freedom of association, the group's founders declared their right to organize.

At first, local authorities were uncertain how to handle this situation. But when the CDP announced that it was going to create a national party, the central government denounced the party, and led a campaign to arrest and imprison all CDP leaders. Human Rights Watch says that it took a full year for the government to silence the group.

That is not the end of the story, however. While they may have been officially silenced in China, the group is still active. In fact, there are foreign offices of the group all over the world, and the Overseas Exiles Headquarters was officially established in the U.S. last December ("Chinese Democratic Party's Overseas Exiles", 2004).

The Internet and IT were and still remain quite instrumental to the activities and goals of the CDP. The CDP uses the Internet to disseminate information, especially through two-way communication such as e-mail, chat rooms, and bulletin boards, for communication, coordination, and organization with much more ease than would have been possible before the advent of the Internet (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

In fact, they assert that e-mail was critical to the formation and development of the CDP. Its membership ballooned from about 12 activists in one region to more than 200 in several provinces and areas throughout China in only four months, in large part due to the e-mail efforts of its members (Farley, 1999, as cited in Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). The Zhejiang branch of the CDP apparently became especially important and influential to the party, as many dissidents in the area owned computers and had e-mail access (“Police Arrest Dissidents”, 1999, as cited in Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

Political dissidents and members of the CDP also use the Internet and e-mail to disseminate information to international media and friends about activities, arrests, and human rights violations. One of the leaders of the CDP, Wu Yilong, received an 11-year prison sentence when he was accused of publishing pro-CDP articles on the Internet, and using e-mail to contact foreign pro-democracy organizations (Platt, 1999). Platt further goes on to say that during searches of suspected political dissident’s home or offices, the authorities first seize the computer.

In addition to e-mail, the CDP also uses the popular BBS forum to further their goals. In fact, in December 2000, the group developed more than 12 Chinese-language BBS sites (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). These are, of course, not without cost. In December 2001, Wang Jinbo, a member of the CDP, was sentenced to four years in prison for posting a message on the Internet demanding the government to re-evaluate the pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square (Wong, 2001).

Also, Human Rights Watch announced that in September 1999, authorities detained Qi Yanchen, a former China Development Union member and a member of the CDP, whose electronic magazine *Consultations* pushed the CDU agenda (“U.S. China Policy”, 1999).

The CDP, as well as other dissident groups, use other methods of disseminating information, specifically from the one-way perspective. Tools like e-mail spamming

allow groups to send uncensored information to a huge number of people within China, and allow the recipients “plausible deniability” (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002). The New-York based office of the CDP aims to use this method to send 100,000 copies of the party’s political platform and other information to Chinese users. Such schemes are difficult to stop.

The CDP’s website is another method through which the group furthers its goals. The website includes a wealth of information on the CDP including information on local and foreign branches, as well as BBS forums for discussion (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

Given all of the tools used by the CDP, it is quite clear that the categories described by Smith, Kearns, and Fine (2005) are used by Chinese activists, albeit more tailored to their highly censored environment. In the case of the CDP, it was necessary that a large mobilization worked together on the common goals of the CDP to even formulate (collaboration). To work together, it was necessary to communicate through e-mail, BBS, and other methods (communication). They distributed original information via these methods, as well as their website and e-mail spamming (new media/content development). All of their actions were coordinated among the supporters via these diverse methods (organizing/collective action).

There is not much research on the previously-described technical tools specifically used by the CDP, except for the references to the newsletter e-mail spamming. It is likely that members have used at least some of the tools, given the high interest in both sending and receiving “objectionable” information.

Considering these experiences of the CDP as a dissident political organization in the extremely controlled Chinese Internet environment, what do the prospects look like for cyber activists?

The Future for Chinese Cyber activists

Given the plethora of articles from the Western view, it would seem that the future of Internet control in China will fall less and less in the hands of the government. After all, Bill Clinton, former President of the U.S., told an audience at Johns Hopkins University that

“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 to the wall."

(Kalathil, Drake, & Boas, 2000)

Clinton said this, however, from his Western context where many people believe there is not much control over the Internet (Wikipedia, 2005), definitely not the case in China. Clinton said this before the Chinese government placed even greater restrictions on creating and maintaining websites and blogs, as well as exponentially increasing its efforts in removing cyber threats. In the end, after all, who is to say what a non-democratic, authoritarian government is allowed to do, other than itself? Certainly not the foreign human rights monitors who can only report what is happening from afar, and are not even acknowledged by the Chinese government.

We read statistics and hear many stories, but has the government fundamentally changed, other than in its economic sphere? Are China's glimmers of an emerging civil society a myth? Is China's promotion of e-governance is just a propaganda tool, designed to placate the plethora of human rights activists and ordinary citizens into believing that their government is really starting to change? After all, that forum allows for an increase in surveillance and direct filtering of objectionable material.

The results of the cat and mouse games so far do not paint a rosy picture of the future. Will cyber activists be able to see results from their efforts and not continue to be condemned and harshly punished? While the consequences of their actions may not be predicted with certainty, it is safe to assume that there will always be cyber activists promoting their goals, however more underground and creative their efforts may become.

The number of activists may depend on the costs of their activism, however. We see more cyber activists being detained, but does this mean that more of the activists are being caught or there are more activists in the pool? Are China's activists only among the mainly highly educated people already connected to the Internet? Perhaps. But given the continued past and expected future exponential growth in the number of Internet users, it would make sense that there would be a larger pool from which cyber activism can occur. China's stricter controls may expand an equally determined subculture for political cyber activism.

While the numbers of cyber activists will likely increase, their nature and goals may change. What will the face of future cyber activism look like? Will activists continue to promote the rights of ordinary Chinese citizens? Will there be new areas on which to focus that are of more importance?

Wong (2004) suggests that the nature of detainees is indeed changing. He discusses a current trend in the decreasing number of detainees who were either directly related to or discussed sensitive issues like Falun Gong or the China Democracy Party, and an increase in the number of ordinary Internet user detentions. Among several examples over the last few years, he cites the story of Liu Di, a 22-year-old Beijing Normal University student, who was arrested in November 2002 after posting criticisms on the closings of Internet cafés in China, and asked for more freedom of expression on the Internet. She was an average Internet user, not very interested in politics, likely could not afford her own computer, and relied on Internet cafés – a similar profile to a high number of Chinese citizens. Wong shares that thousands of Internet users signed petitions demanding her release. In response to the overwhelming public support for her, the authorities released her in November, 2003, stating that there was not enough evidence to convict her. Perhaps the authorities felt they had made a mistake, or they did not want to challenge the public support. Interestingly, Wong notes that there are no reports of people being detained for voicing their opinions on these issues.

If the government's definition of Internet crime is blurring, and the public is apparently only concerned with less sensitive detainments, what does the future hold? Certainly, the international community will continue to avidly follow and comment on the actions, but what do Chinese citizens want the future to look like? More freedom of expression, but for whom, and under what circumstances? And are these their own genuine feelings or are they merely the acceptable public views, carefully cultivated by the Communist Party?

Unfortunately, there is not very much published research from the Chinese perspective. There is a wealth of information that could be gained from freely hearing from Chinese people. Much of the discussion has focused on what Westerners feel, but this projects their democratic views on a society that has never been democratic, and has had a longer history with different values and philosophies. It also seems that many

writers feel that positive governmental reform can take place in an unrealistically short time, citing only a small number of examples of activism as proof of future democratic leanings.

The Chinese view, as we have seen, is not nearly as dramatic as the Western view. Many Chinese have more access to more information than ever before (Tsui, 2001), although the nature and potential biases can be considered. Considering Liang's (2003) study and the 12-13% of interviewees who agree that politics needs to be managed and controlled, and Li's (2004) discussion of media influence, would Chinese citizens continue to feel this way if there was a free flow of information?

Also, Wong's (2004) examples show that Chinese Internet users are not afraid to voice their opinions on issues that are important to them, albeit in a non-unified manner. They do not publicly protest the arrest of dissidents like China Democracy Party founder Wang Youcai; however, Wong suggests that users are somewhat interested in protecting freedom of expression. Do users not publicly protest the arrest of political dissidents because they sincerely agree with the government, or because they fear their own arrest in this more sensitive issue? Future research could look into these issues.

With the thrust of the government's strong promotion of the Internet and Information Technology mainly being through its economic plans, it would make sense to also consider China's larger economic and geopolitical future when discussing the future of the smaller and therefore subsequently affected issue of political cyber activism in China. In addition to affecting its internal policies, economic motives influence China's foreign policies. Zakaria (2005) notes that much of the world now depends on China's market. China's economic, and by extension political, goals may continue in the future, although it has recently been acting in more aggressive and hostile ways, perhaps because of a clash between its economic wants and its political wants, stemming from its nationalism, history, honour, and pride.

Zakaria further suggests that nationalism has replaced communism as the ideology of the Communist Party. Nationalism spills over into all aspects of Chinese life. The danger that the Communist Party may find, however, is that the strong emotions of the people in certain approved spheres, for example in hostility towards Japan, may spill over into other spheres, like promoting democracy, which may not easily be switched off.

Given these examples of considerations the government is facing, the trickle down effect into political cyber activism is difficult to gauge. There are speculations that China's consistently growing economy is on the brink of a collapse (Zakaria, 2005). If the majority of its decisions are made from its economic dominance and political skills, what would the future be like if China's economy were to collapse? An economist might better hypothesize an answer to this scenario; however, it would be safe to assume that its current heavy reliance on its economic might would dramatically affect the future way in which the country is governed. Would the government focus on more domestic concerns and take away the gains Chinese feel they have received in freedom of expression? Will there be even more control?

We are already seeing an increasing trend in the number of citizens being detained for expressing their opinions on the Internet, whether or not they are true political activists. There is an ever increasing sophistication in the controlling techniques used by the government. Tools that cyber activists use are quickly circumvented by the authorities, as we have seen in the case of proxy servers. We are seeing more and more foreign companies like Microsoft and Google willing to go to the trouble to set up businesses within China and bow to the government's pressure in developing tools that following the same methods of censorship, efforts which they would not likely be promoting if the situation were to change soon. (See Ku, 2001, for a discussion on barriers to foreign investment in the Chinese internet industry.)

Given these disturbing trends, it looks like the future for political cyber activists in China will be quite grave. It seems likely that there will be fundamental governmental reform, and while the nature of this is uncertain, we can hypothesize that this will result in less freedom of expression. Undoubtedly, Internet infrastructure will continue to be greatly developed, but given the strict controls that the government is continuing to enforce, many of which are supported by Chinese citizens, the outlook for cyber activists will likely continue along the same vein for the foreseeable future.

So much effort has been put into developing Internet monitoring and filtering tools, even in the West, that a future area for activists to focus on could be in the opposite direction – improving the tools for freedom of expression. This would, however, involve more of an international community's response, in conjunction with activists within

China. Wong (2003) discusses such a need for a forum where Chinese would be freely able to discuss and even criticize topics, even if they criticize the countries and organizations that are assisting them. Chinese must be able to see these as their own entities and not extensions of foreign government's actions. This would be quite an undertaking, and further research could determine the feasibility, nature, and requirements of such an endeavour.

Freedom of expression within certain constraints is not really freedom of expression. Less freedom of expression means less hope for a civil society. Less hope for a civil society means less hope for a democratic society, or at least one that listens to and values the feelings and opinions of its citizens. What all this means is that political cyber activists in China will continue to have their work cut out for them both now and in the future.

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