The Hundred Flowers Campaign, Version 2.0: The State of Internet Politics in China

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As China has experienced 30 years of consecutive annual economic growth, Chinese citizens are now enjoying the technological benefits that other developed countries have already discovered. More than 465 million Chinese now own mobile phones and 420 million regularly access the Internet. While Chinese netizens, or Internet-using citizens, express themselves in ways they never could before, the Chinese Communist Party is struggling to keep up with censorship and sponsorship on the web. This has created another “100 Flowers Campaign,” the program through which the Party opened itself up to criticism during the Cultural Revolution. As a consequence, a small minority of civic-minded netizens have pushed the boundaries of government control with varying consequences. In a fascinating show of tolerance, most people in China who criticize government policies on the Internet are simply left alone. This essay will outline the nature of Internet censorship in China, exploring the CCP’s dilemmas in balancing priorities and the freedoms that the Chinese people have gained.

“It is only by employing the method of discussion, criticism, and reasoning that we can really foster correct ideas and overcome wrong ones.”

– Mao Zedong

In February 1956, Chairman Mao made an unusual appeal to the intellectuals of China. He entreated them to openly share their opinions and criticisms concerning the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Mao titled this the “Hundred Flowers Campaign” and called for the academic community to criticize the government by urging “a hundred schools of thought (to) contend.” At first, some intellectuals gave moderate reform advice but most stayed clear of any real criticism. Mao and the CCP continued to encourage and pressure scholars and professionals to voice their opinions on the weaknesses and problems of the government. On June 1, 1957, the floodgates opened and within weeks millions of letters had poured in. Many of these were highly critical of party corruption, the harshness of previous campaigns, censorship of foreign literature, as well as the CCP control over intellectuals. Democratic rallies sprung up at many universities and wall posters denounced the entire communist system (He, 2001, p. 282). By July, the campaign was impossible to control so Mao and the CCP launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign to arrest, denounce, and/or blacklist anyone who had spoken too harshly of the Party (Fairbank and Goldman, 2006, p. 365).

The Hundred Flowers Campaign and subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign can be viewed together as a pattern in the history of the CCP. Although the history of the CCP is relatively brief, there have been several examples, including the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, of the Party relaxing its policies on free speech and then punishing those who exercised their rights. This pattern continues today but in the much wider and more scrutinized forum of the Internet. The Internet in China represents a nation-wide “speaker’s corner” where any citizen is able to voice his or her opinions but many are still fearful of potential Party retribution (Giese, 2004, p. 26).

The expansion of the Internet in China has provided a medium through which many Chinese citizens can make their voices and opinions heard to peers and Party officials alike. More than 420 million Chinese now use the Internet regularly to blog, e-mail, report breaking news stories and discuss national and international issues. Many of these netizens (Internet-using citizens) find this outlet extremely useful and relieving to finally be able to express their concerns and release their frustrations about government policies (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 33). The Chinese people also use the Internet as a governmental check against injustice. This is indeed ironic since the Internet in China is highly censored, thereby making itself a symbol of injustice, at least according to Western liberal thought.

Speech given on February 27, 1957, by Mao Zedong at the Supreme State Conference entitled On the Correct Handling of the Contradictions Among the People
Although it may be surprising to many that the Chinese Communist Party is open to suggestions and debate, this is exactly what is happening on the Internet in China, albeit still in a moderate and seemingly controlled arena. The question that this article will address is why the CCP has allowed its citizens to enjoy greater freedoms of speech through the Internet. Why would government officials allow a digital Hundred Flowers Campaign to occur if previous attempts to permit criticisms have ended so violently and have damaged Party image?

The Party has not forgotten the body blows to its own legitimacy in the wake of the Anti-Rightist campaign and the Tiananmen Square Incident and has tried to restore the faith of its citizens through rapid economic expansion. The CCP’s greatest fear is still organized, mass protest, and thus content filters and cyber police are widely used. However, criticism by individuals of government policies and social injustice is being tolerated and even accepted by China’s authoritarian regime.

Much of what the Western media portrays of the digital landscape in China is negative, as they focus constantly on Party censorship and political prisoners. Yet Westerners cannot simply assume that because the Internet is policed and censored, the Chinese people are not happy with the freedoms that remain. On the contrary, many are ecstatic about the possibilities to discover, share, and express new ideas and opinions with any and all Chinese netizens (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 43). Even Chinese intellectuals are able to discuss social and political affairs with other intellectuals on blogs and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS).

We must not either assume that the government strictly censors any and all online political discussion. Some of these BBS forums can even be found on web sites authorized by the government where intellectuals are encouraged to discuss political and social issues. In fact, arguably the most influential intellectual web site in China, Century China (www.cc.org.cn), was directly sponsored by the CCP (Zhou, 2006, p. 171).

This article will discuss the history and current usages of the Internet in China to show how it has become a potential democratic tool for about one third of the Chinese population. I will argue that the Chinese government has allowed this gradual opening to occur, despite superficial attempts to censor and control. I will also answer the questions of why the government has done this and what it means for the Chinese people.

INTERNET USERS AND USAGES

Like many other countries, the Internet in China was cultivated within academic settings, yet it was the CCP that was directly funding and driving the project. The government did this for two reasons. First, the CCP believed that the Internet would drive economic and technological progress in China. Internet technology implementation was pragmatically viewed as an extension of Deng Xiaoping’s reform policies started in 1978. Deng believed that developing an information infrastructure was crucial to achieving success in the “four modernizations,” which are agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology (Zhou, 2006, p. 137).

Second, the CCP perhaps naively believed that they could control the usage and flow of information found and created on the Web. Indeed, many attempts have been made, but effective implementation has not always followed. It is true that more than 30,000 state employees work as cyber cops to patrol and police Internet content (Qiang, 2007, p. 131). However, many rules and policies are bent, broken, circumvented, or simply ignored by corrupt officials.

In 1987 China sent its first e-mail “Beyond the Great Wall, Joining the World (yayue chengcheng, zouxiang shijie)” to scientists at Karlsruhe University in Germany. In 1991, a 64K line was connected through the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center network and by 1995 more than 40,000 Chinese were able to access the Internet. In the following 15 years up until the present, Internet usage in China has exploded to more than 420 million users, making it the country with the most Internet users anywhere in the world.

We cannot assume however, that simply because the number of Chinese netizens has risen, that online political activism has increased at the same rate. Not every Internet user in China is blogging about democracy, human rights, and free speech (Damm, 2003, p. 1). Entertainment, social interaction, information acquisition, and commercial exchange are the main reasons for the nearly 20 hours of Internet use per user per week. Table 1 shows a breakdown of Internet usage in China.

As we can see in Table 1, only 55% of Internet users in China are utilizing blogs and 31% regularly access BBS forums with those actually criticizing government policies being a considerably smaller percentage. The China Internet Network Information Center’s most recent statistical report also showed that more than 35% of users are between the ages of 10 and 19. With these figures in mind, this excerpt from Howard French in the New York Times is intriguing:

“For a vast majority of Internet users, censorship still does not appear to be much of a factor. The most popular Web applications here are games and messaging services, and the most visited Internet sites focus on everyday subjects like entertainment news and sports. Many, in fact, seem only vaguely aware that China’s Internet universe is carefully pruned, and even among those who know, a majority hardly seems to care.” (French, 2008)

This blunt admission that censorship in China matters little to the majority of netizens is hardly the focus of most Western

“Evolution of Internet in China,” China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). Available: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/evolution.shtml. The message was sent to Karlsruhe University of former Western Germany.
media journalists (even French’s article is mostly about Internet repression). However, the reality is that most Chinese netizens are not circulating petitions for the collapse of the “Great Firewall,” but they are being entertained.

Yet Western liberal groups and media are constantly howling for complete Internet freedom in China to be realized. There are indeed some Chinese citizens who agree with their claims even though the Pew Internet & American Life Project’s 2007 survey conducted on Internet use in China showed that almost 85% of Chinese respondents believe that the government should manage and control the Internet (Fallows, 2008). Many even view censorship as a necessary trade-off for free speech rights (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 42). The following three sections will discuss how some Chinese citizens have been utilizing those exact same free speech rights to improve individual and popular power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage Category</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>% of Internet Users</th>
<th>Total # of Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Web entertainment</td>
<td>Web music</td>
<td>82.50%</td>
<td>346,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information acquisition</td>
<td>Web news</td>
<td>78.50%</td>
<td>329,700,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information acquisition</td>
<td>Search engine</td>
<td>76.30%</td>
<td>320,460,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange and communication</td>
<td>Instant messaging</td>
<td>72.40%</td>
<td>304,080,000</td>
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<td>Web entertainment</td>
<td>Web game</td>
<td>70.50%</td>
<td>296,100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Web entertainment</td>
<td>Web video</td>
<td>63.20%</td>
<td>265,440,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange and communication</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>56.50%</td>
<td>237,300,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange and communication</td>
<td>Blog application</td>
<td>55.10%</td>
<td>231,420,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange and communication</td>
<td>Social exchange website</td>
<td>50.10%</td>
<td>210,420,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Web entertainment</td>
<td>Network literature</td>
<td>44.80%</td>
<td>188,160,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial exchange</td>
<td>Web shopping</td>
<td>33.80%</td>
<td>141,960,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exchange and communication</td>
<td>Forum/BBS</td>
<td>31.50%</td>
<td>132,300,000</td>
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<td>Commercial exchange</td>
<td>Online payment</td>
<td>30.50%</td>
<td>128,100,000</td>
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<td>Commercial exchange</td>
<td>E-banking</td>
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<td>122,220,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial exchange</td>
<td>Online stock operation</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
<td>63,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial exchange</td>
<td>Travel ordering</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>36,120,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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“Now chat rooms, blogs, and BBS forums can facilitate anyone’s rise to stardom without the consent of the central government. Chinese netizens now have the ability to gain tremendous social power without approval or acceptance from anyone but their peers.”

BLOGS, BBS FORUMS, AND SOCIAL NETWORKING
As seen in Table 1, the number of bloggers in July 2010 has risen to 231,420,000 people. Blogging gained huge popularity in China after a highly provocative “sex diary” blog started by Mu Zi Mei rose to national notoriety in 2003. It contained daily updates of her various sexual escapades. Her blog led many of her readers and others to her blog hosting provider, Blogcn.com (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 35).

Before blogging, it would have been impossible for a person like Mu Zi Mei to become such a national celebrity. MacKinnon states that magazine publishers, film directors, and news editors were the “cultural gatekeepers” who decided who became famous and popular. Now chat rooms, blogs, and BBS forums can facilitate anyone’s rise to stardom without the consent of the central government. Chinese netizens now have the ability to gain tremendous social power without approval or acceptance from anyone but their peers.
The SARS outbreak is an interesting example of how Chinese netizens assumed the role of social sentinels and actively disseminated information that had been deliberately withheld by the CCP. Wang Jianshuo, a Microsoft engineer living in Shanghai, blogged daily about the SARS outbreak in China in 2003, even though the central government was restricting information on the severity of the outbreak and denying access to international health inspectors (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 36; Qiang, 2007, p. 135). E-mail, first received from foreign senders then spread domestically, was also used to effectively carry otherwise censored information during the epidemic. In fact, a critical turning point in the SARS coverage happened when a retired surgeon named Dr. Jiang Yanyong sent an e-mail to Hong Kong describing the true nature of the outbreak. Time Asia then used Dr. Jiang's e-mail in an expose of the government cover-up (Qiang, 2007, pp. 135-136).

There have been many instances where netizens have called upon corrupt or inefficient government officials to change their policies. In November 2002, an author known by the user name Crazy For You posted a poignant essay titled “Shenzhen, Who Abandoned You?” on the Strong Nation Forum and the Development Forum, both government-sanctioned BBS forums hosted by People’s Daily and Xinhua News, respectively (Qiang, 2007, p. 137). The article discussed many of the problems inside Shenzhen’s Special Economic Zone (SEZ) including local government policy and a poor investment environment. The author stayed within approved censorship boundaries as the report openly and frankly criticized Shenzhen’s city officials. The article generated so much public support that the local government was unable to ignore it. Many readers sent the article electronically all over China and it was reposted on many official and semiformal websites. The mayor of Shenzhen actually met with the author and included the issues debated in the piece on the city’s reform agenda (Qiang, 2007, p. 137). This unprecedented event demonstrates how any citizen in China can facilitate change in China’s political and social environments.

Unfortunately for some bloggers, the central government and their army of cyber cops have the technology to track down those dissidents who cross the line into “dangerous” content or who reveal “state secrets.” While both of these impermissible acts are extremely difficult to define, it is nevertheless difficult to cover one’s blogging tracks (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 41). It requires a high level of technical skill as well as frequently changing one’s blog host. This is why many Internet users, whether they are activists or not, have turned to BBS forums as a more discreet way of discussing politically sensitive material (Banne, 2010, p. 795).

The freedom that BBS forums provide is closely linked to the highly sought-after anonymity of the medium. BBS users are able to freely discuss social, political, and economic issues without an overwhelming fear that they will be caught by Big Brother. While theoretically, all Internet users are required to disclose their identities before usage of a particular ISP, this policy has never been strictly enforced (Giese, 2004, p. 26). Therefore those netizens posting “dangerous” content on BBS forums have little trepidation in discussing a wide variety of topics, political or otherwise.

Content filters remain in place and immediately censor more than 1,000 “hot” words such as Falun Gong, Tiananmen, torture, democracy, massacre, and specific names of Party officials (Lippman, 2007, p. 479). However, many users apply a variety of methods to evade filtering software and even the cyber cops themselves. Homophones can be used to fool the filters but human censors, called hanzhu or ‘Big Mamas’, can certainly understand the hidden message (Giese, 2004, p. 32). More sophisticated disguises can be employed such as splitting one’s post up into several different headers and empty postings, allowing the readers to solve the puzzle. While this strategy may fool censors in real time, state officials can discover the true meaning in time, which may result in serious consequences. The tactic most used then is, as Giese suggests, best described by the Chinese proverb “Pointing at the mulberry tree while actually addressing the acacia.” Critical authors therefore use circuitous wording, metaphors, and indirect expressions, while avoiding direct challenges, to articulate their opinions, which can then be understood by their readers (Giese, 2004, p. 32).

One of the most influential political BBS forums in China is the People’s Daily Online Strengthening-China Forum (SCF), opened under Party permission and supervision (Zhou, 2006, p. 147). A brief look at the creation and subsequent timeline of the SCF may prove beneficial at understanding the political discussion that occurs on a government-approved web site and the gradual softening of censorship that is happening.

On New Year’s Day 1997, the People’s Daily launched its online newspaper to become the first major newspaper in China to be on the Internet (Zhou, 2006, p. 136). English and Japanese editions were later added to inform and influence those outside of China. The Strengthening-China Forum was subsequently created to increase popularity for the paper and to encourage nationalistic discussion. On May 8, U.S.-led NATO forces operating against Yugoslavia bombed a Chinese embassy in Belgrade. On May 9, a BBS forum entitled “Protesting NATO’s Barbarous Action Forum” was created and thousands of messages immediately poured in. By late August, the total number had risen to more than 200,000 posts, many of which were “extremely strong,” stated the chief architect of People’s Online Daily, Jiang Yaping. According to Guo Liang, a friend of Jiang and an Internet usage survey conductor, People’s Daily Online was planning a BBS forum with a “brand name” and had met with software developers to make preparations to do so (Zhou, 2006, p. 148). However, the online patriotic fervor that followed the bombing of the Chinese embassy occurred with perfect timing to solidify SCF’s place on the Internet as a forum of the people. Many Chinese netizens began using SCF regularly to discuss politi-
cal and social issues, trusting it as a safe-haven of expression even though it was a government-sponsored web site.

This example shows that the government in China is willing to provide an outlet to its citizens where they can release frustrations, anger, concerns, and opinions. Mass organization and protest is what most distress the CCP. Allowing individuals to blow off some steam in a virtual space can actually have advantages for the central government, especially if those individuals are writing with nationalistic fervor, like many posts on the SCF (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 33). People can vent their irritations and resentments online without feeling the need to organize any form of public protest. However, this logic may be flawed as many protests lacking central organization have arisen via e-mail, blogs, and social networking sites.

**INTELLECTUALS AND THE INTERNET**

Whether Chairman Mao’s true purpose for unveiling the original Hundred Flowers Campaign was to simply encourage government criticism for the betterment of the state or to polarize the masses for yet another contradiction may never be known. What is important to this essay is that the outcome caused most Chinese intellectuals to distance themselves from political discussions in public forums (Fairbank and Goldman, 2006, p. 365). Time and technology are healing those wounds. While intellectuals may always be wary of government censors and the consequences thereof, the advent of the Internet has ignited a rebirth of dialogue within the intellectual community (Zhou, 2006, p. 180).

Yet intellectual web sites and BBS forums are subject to all the same censorship and scrutiny that stalks the rest of the Chinese Internet. The state obviously wants to maintain authoritarian rule through a series of technological and psychological controls. The intellectual community is seeking an ultimately free press where ideas can flow and expand unrestrained. The reality is that both sides have made concessions which allow intellectuals to discuss and debate political, social, and economic issues online without too much fear of suppression. Some web sites have even seen historic compromises between the two sides which gives hope for a continually widening and freer online forum.

One web site in particular, Century China, www.cc.org.cn (although it has now been removed), showed Chinese intellectuals two important points regarding the Internet and the state. First, the government is willing to support intellectual web sites, including those that publish original scholarly articles and have politically-oriented BBS forums. Century China was even one of the few web sites that paid scholars for their works that were published (Zhou, 2006, p. 171). Second, even though the government sponsored the Century China web site, the CCP was said to “rarely interfere” with the editor’s work (Zhou, 2006, p. 173). These two actions clearly show how the government has extended the olive branch to an intellectual community that has not forgotten the Anti-Rightist campaign or Tiananmen Square.

The editors of Century China claim that the government knows their track record and allows them to make the decisions on censorship. A brief look at some of the members on the advisory committee easily show why this was the case. Three Nobel laureates, including Yang Zhenning, and many famous Chinese intellectuals and scholars, including Wang Yuanhua and Jin Yaoji, make up the board (Zhou, 2006, p. 175). All of these factors made Century China unique because it was funded privately, edited by intellectuals, and rarely censored by the government.

Century China and other intellectual web sites helped to expose Chinese intellectuals to a new medium of information sharing. They can now publish articles and discuss important political and social issues without an overwhelming fear of another Anti-Rightist Campaign situation. Chinese intellectual web sites will continue to develop and although government control may never fully disappear, the intellectual community is encouraged by the degree of openness and the rich content now available on the web.

**POLICE CASES AND POPULAR VICTORIES**

While content filters and cyber police may still be keeping China’s Internet from total freedom, popular outcries against the judicial system and government cover-ups continue to be heard and acknowledged around the country. Citizens arrested on suspect charges have been acquitted and aborted investigations have been exposed after online mobs have cried out against the injustice. Chinese netizens have discovered a new identity as the sentinels of a just society.

Lin Hai, a computer software engineer, became the first Chinese citizen to be imprisoned for “subversive” use of the Internet. He was charged with providing more than 30,000 e-mail addresses to two overseas Chinese dissident online magazines, *V.I.P. Reference* and *Tunnel*. Arrests concerning “subversive” Internet use had been made before this, including the China Democracy Party leader Wang Youcai, but none had resulted in imprisonment (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002, p. 54). The CCP continued to charge and arrest dissidents involved in sharing “state secrets,” which can mean anything the government decides it to mean. However, with the advent of BBS forums, blogs, and social networking sites, public protest can now start anywhere at anytime with little or no organization.

Social web sites have also been utilized successfully to fight the injustices of arbitrary arrests. A blogger named Guo Baofeng (twitter handle - @amoiiist) was arrested in the Fujian province on July 15, 2009. Fortunately for Mr. Guo, the police failed to confiscate his cell phone and he was able to send two short messages to his Twitter account:

“Pls help me, I grasp the phone during police sleep.”

“I have been arrested by Mawei police, sos.” (Guo, 2009)

Guo’s friends and family quickly reposted and “retweet-ed” his plea for help. One blogger arranged for hundreds of...
people to send postcards to the detention center. Another blogger organized a fundraiser that raised money to pay for his defense. Before 16 days in detention, the police released Mr. Guo. Before cell phones and the Internet, Guo Baofeng would have just been another inexplicable disappearance in an authoritarian state (Yang, 2009). However, the power to share information quickly and broadly allows people to fight back against police brutality and corruption.

Another well-publicized example of Chinese netizens joining together to campaign for the release of a prisoner is the story of Liu Di. Liu Di frequently posted articles on the popular BBS forum Xici Hutong. She often challenged the state’s policies, including publishing an essay that argued that cyber police were actually harmful to national security (Qiang, 2006, p. 139).

In 2002, Liu Di mysteriously disappeared from the forum, causing her online friends to investigate her whereabouts. Her friends discovered that Liu Di had been indicted for “endangering national security.” An immediate response swept the country and an online petition with more than 2,000 signatures was sent to the central government. After a year of campaigning, Liu was finally released on November 28, 2003 (Qiang, 2006, p. 139).

Internet users are also discovering their power to investigate and report news stories, pressuring officials to fully investigate matters that would otherwise be covered up. Qiang states, “Internet-enabled activism ... has not only expanded traditional media reporting but has also contributed to political results on these issues” (Qiang, 2006, p. 138). One example of this is the arbitrary arrest of Sun Zhigang in 2003. Sun was detained for three days for not possessing the proper identity papers. He died in custody and the authorities refused to investigate. Sun’s parents posted information surrounding the arrest and received an immediate response. Sun was evidently arrested under the Custody and Repatriation system established in 1982 which allows police to detain any nonresidents of a city who do not possess the proper paperwork. Although human rights organizations have tried for years to get this policy repealed, Sun’s death prompted four professors to call upon the state prosecutor to properly investigate. In three months, the entire system was abolished and those responsible were convicted in court (Qiang, 2007, p. 138).

Obviously not all cases of injustice have been rectified but these examples show the growing power that is the online collective protest. Chinese netizens continue to grow in the consciousness of their identity as social watchmen. These popular victories continue to give the people confidence that they can help to facilitate a more democratic China.

**Government Control?**

In September 2000, the Telecommunication Regulations were passed by the CCP which included a standardized list of nine forms of objectionable information that was not to be “made available, copied, transmitted, or spread through the telecommunication networks.” All subsequent government policies and regulations have adopted these nine guidelines (Zhou, 2006, p. 142). The first of these guidelines states that “that which is against the basic principles established by the Constitution” is strictly forbidden. Some of the other objectionable materials include obscenities, pornography, discrimination of nationalities, the revealing of “state secrets,” etc.

Other stipulations have been added to these regulations, including the restriction of news dissemination by those not authorized by the central or provincial governments (Zhou, 2006, pp. 146-147). This was to ensure that news broadcasts were to be authorized by the CCP before circulation, but with the advent of blogs and social network sites, many professional and amateur reporters have turned to personal reporting to get around the censors. Some grassroots reporters have been detained for violating this government policy but nowhere near the number of citizens actually participating in this activity.

It is important to reiterate that the CCP thought the Internet to be of absolute necessity to economic growth, even with the possibility that they could not control its information completely. While it is difficult to conceive that the central government could have foreseen the Internet explosion that has ensued, they have created policies that in principle could meet the needs of a dynamic economy and help control “dangerous” content. As early as March 1993, Deputy Premier Zhu Rongji proposed and deployed the establishment of the National Public Economic Information Network (i.e. Golden Bridge Project). This project aimed to create an information superhighway that would interconnect all of China. As Pecht states, “The purposes of this project are to facilitate macro-economic control and strategic decision-making by the state, to facilitate the sharing of national economic and social information, and to build and promote the development of a modern electronics information industry.” Along with Internet access, the Golden Bridge provided email, data exchange, and information and application service programs (Pecht, 2007, p. 81).

The central government claims that control of information is a high priority, yet some Internet policies are never fully implemented or only selectively enforced (Hachigian, 2001, p. 123). One of Deng Xiaoping’s favorite sayings in the early 1980s was: “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.” To ensure that the “flies” of “dangerous” content did not result in a loss of party
legitimacy, the Golden Shield Project was undertaken to restrict Internet material that could be harmful to the CCP (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 33). Often nicknamed the “Great Firewall of China,” the Golden Shield Project aimed at blocking foreign IP addresses that contained dangerous content and proactively censoring domestic Internet content in websites, e-mail, blogs, and BBS forums. However, proxy servers can be easily used to circumvent the firewall and access foreign web sites (Perry and Selden, 2003, p. 265).

Private Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are required to register their users’ personal information with the government. They must also utilize their own “window screens” and “fly swatters” in the form of content filters and human censors respectively because the task of controlling all Internet content in China has become too expensive for the central government (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 38). The CCP simply pawns its censorship wishes onto private companies instead of taking the responsibility itself, saving the state millions of dollars in surveillance costs but ensuring that no uniform system of control is totally enforced (Klang, 2006, p. 188).

Many regulations established by the central government have proved to be difficult to enforce on a nation-wide level. This occurs for several reasons including economic cost and state corruption. A striking example of this is the exorbitant number of unlicensed Internet cafes in China. In 2002, only 46,000 of 200,000 Internet cafes actually had the correct licenses and permission to operate (Zhou, 2006, p. 139). The businessmen were anxious to see quick returns and often failed to receive all the necessary permits. Local officials craved the economic stimulus to their regions (and to their wallets in the form of bribes) so they frequently allowed such illegal operations to occur (Zhou, 2006, pp. 140-141).

Another example of government failure to follow through on declarations of Internet control is the Green Dam Project. The Green Dam Censorware System is content-filtering software that the CCP wanted to install on every computer in China by July 1, 2009. This software would have prevented individuals from viewing any content deemed “subversive” on the Internet. The mandate was given by directly from Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) but as the date came closer and anti-Green Dam pressure grew, they changed the download from mandatory to optional. The software’s security concerns were one factor and cost was certainly another (Fang, 2010). The Green Dam Project has collapsed as the PRC is currently being sued by the U.S. based company CYBERsitter for allegedly stealing more than 3,000 lines of code (Business Wire, 2010).

The CCP has instituted censorship policies that are sporadically implemented by the government and easily avoided by knowledgeable netizens. However, there is a method to their madness. The CCP realizes first and foremost that providing for their citizens’ economic needs will effectively solidify their authority as the ruling power. They do not need to worry about legitimacy loss as long as the Chinese people continue to enjoy improved standards of living and at least some personal freedoms (Hachigian, 2001, p. 129).

Another Pew survey in 2010 showed that although much of the world feels a sense of “widespread gloom,” 87% of Chinese people surveyed expressed “satisfaction with the national conditions” (Jiang 2010, p. 77). Perry suggests that unlike Western societies that focus more on individual privileges, China’s Confucian philosophies place the welfare of the collective over the rights of the one (Perry, 2003). Therefore it is difficult for Westerners to understand how 85% of Chinese citizens can approve of government censorship, but as long as the government continues to provide economic benefits to the whole, the majority will remain content.

**Conclusion**

In March of 2000, Former U.S. President Bill Clinton compared China’s attempts to control Internet content as “trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” The truth is that China’s stance on Internet control over the last decade has changed to encourage macroeconomic growth while extending limited personal freedoms. Providing China with a booming economy has taken precedent over authoritarian censorship. The CCP has still made significant efforts to control Internet content but this is not their top priority as they are discovering the “Jell-O” to be increasingly slippery and the “nail” to be too expensive.

As a result of these decisions, Chinese citizens are now enjoying more freedoms in the realm of free speech than they ever have under the communist regime. Intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike are able to voice opinions, engage in political and social debate, and even criticize government officials and policies. That is not to say that fear of government retribution has completely vanished. In fact, many scholars would argue that this same fear causes Chinese netizens to police or censor themselves when they are posting material online that may be “subversive” to the state (Yu, 2009, p. 115).

Yet China’s Internet continues to open forums and media that allow any Chinese citizen a voice and an identity. Many who were integral in the release of Guo Baofeng or Liu Di may simply be poor students or humble factory workers who, without the Internet, would have no political voice. Conversely, when they enter the virtual world of blogging, BBS forums, or social networking, they have power. They now have the power to change their communities, expose
corruption, and free the wrongfully incarcerated. The Chinese people are constantly striving toward a more open Internet. To quote MacKinnon (2007), “It is a story of tene- cious optimists, slowly and patiently pushing back the bound- aries, believing that in the end, history is on their side” (p. 42).

The CCP may one day regret their decisions to allow its citizens the power of democratic voice through the Internet, but that day is not today. Consequences like the Anti- Rightist Campaign could once again damage or even destroy the legitimacy of the party, particularly, as Hachigian suggests, if China experiences serious economic depression (Hachigian, 2001, pp. 131-132). However, the CCP’s actions speak louder than any of its weak policies concerning the Internet; economic progress is more important than complete Internet content control and this decision benefits all of China.

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