



*Room with a view
Credit: Reuters/Sanger Shanghai*

CYBER ZONE

China's online pioneers are pushing the boundaries of free speech, writes **Rebecca MacKinnon**

‘There are two kinds of people in China: Internet users and non-Internet users,’ writer Yang Hengjun recently told me. Chinese people who get their information from the Internet, he believes, have a very different perspective on current events than Chinese who rely on traditional media. ‘The gap is growing. People who spend time reading news, blogs and chatrooms online know about all kinds of things that people who just read newspapers and watch TV have never heard of.’

A former Chinese diplomat and employee of ‘various government departments’, Yang dreamt of writing Tom Clancy-style bestsellers about China’s intelligence and law enforcement. But given that the Chinese government doesn’t even admit that it conducts espionage, Chinese publishers would not touch the subject with a ten-foot pole. Then came the Internet. His spy trilogy became a smash hit with the Chinese diaspora. For the past year he has also been blogging, writing online commentary and essays which he says have garnered even more web traffic than his online novels. ‘The appearance of the Internet changed me,’ Yang wrote in an essay last year. ‘When I found out that I could publish the works that I wrote on the Internet, my creative passion could no longer be reined in.’

Many Chinese Internet writers and bloggers feel similarly liberated and empowered. Yet at the same time, China’s Internet censorship system is the most extensive and sophisticated in the world. China is a world leader in jailing ‘cyber-dissidents’ – currently 48 according to Reporters Without Borders. To westerners living in largely democratic countries, it is hard to understand how liberation, empowerment, and optimism can coexist alongside suppression, censorship, and compromise. Yet all of these words are equally and simultaneously appropriate in describing what is happening on the Chinese Internet.

In November 2005, roughly 100 bloggers gathered in Shanghai to celebrate their liberation and empowerment at the first annual Chinese Blogger Conference. In his opening keynote, Isaac Mao (see pp97–106) declared that in the blogosphere, ‘Everybody is somebody.’ Videobloggers streamed the proceedings live online and others live-blogged their photos and observations. Nothing got censored and bloggers expressed irritation when western journalists covering the event focused on questions of censorship, showing less interest in the bloggers’ accomplishments. Zhou Shuguang, a nerdy 24-year-old vegetable seller from Hunan writing under the *nom de plume* ‘Zola’, spoke passionately about how blogging has changed his life by connecting him to all kinds of people around China. A year and a half later, in early 2007, Zhou skyrocketed

MADE IN CHINA

to media fame when he dropped everything and raised money from his readers to cover a breaking story on his blog that the professional Chinese media had been ordered to stop reporting [see pp90–97].

Depending on whose count you believe, China now has somewhere between 20–50 million bloggers. Very few Chinese bloggers write overtly about politics and public affairs. There is no ‘political blogosphere’ as in the United States, the United Kingdom and many other countries. Certainly, the fact that several dozen people are in jail for crossing the political line is a factor, but it’s not the main deterrent. China’s Internet censorship is effective enough that most Chinese – even most Chinese Internet users – have not heard of the 48 jailed Internet writers. Most Chinese, even most ‘netizens’, have not heard of Hu Jia the Aids activist, free speech advocate and blogger who was recently sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison for subversion. Few have read the blog of his wife Zeng Jinyan, a free speech advocate featured in *Time* magazine’s ‘person of the year’ issue 2006: her blog has been blocked by Chinese ISPs since mid-2006. While they are a minority in Chinese cyberspace, the many thousands of Chinese bloggers and chatroom denizens who do have a strong interest in reading and commenting about public affairs do not lie awake at night worrying about a possible knock on their door. One of the reasons for this lack of fear is that China’s censorship effectively protects people from themselves, while holding others – service providers and other ‘gatekeepers’ – more directly responsible for keeping their users’ speech within acceptable boundaries.

Many overseas websites, including many of the large international blogging platforms such as Wordpress.com and Blogspot.com have been blocked in China. If a blogger creates a website on any overseas platform or independent hosting service – even those that are not blocked to begin with – his website or parts of it can end up being blocked by the Chinese filtering system if his content contains any blacklisted keywords or URLs. While at least a percentage of Chinese Internet users know how to use proxy technology and other tools to get around the blocks, many people say they hesitate to use these tools too regularly for fear of calling attention to themselves as frequent consumers of sensitive content and potentially becoming surveillance targets.

Thus, if you’re a Chinese Internet writer or blogger and you want to have a meaningful number of readers *within* China, you need to use a web-hosting platform or blog-hosting platform that is located on computer servers inside China. The companies that operate these services are all held responsible by government regulators for the content that their customers post on the

websites and blogs that they host. In other words, if hypothetical blogger Wang Xiaohua writes a blog post questioning the crackdown against Tibetan protestors in Lhasa or expressing support for greater Tibetan autonomy, her blog-hosting service is expected to censor her post. If the blog-hosting company fails to censor such content, its executives will receive a call from the State Council's local office in charge of Internet management, warning that their business licence will be subject to review unless they do a better job at controlling content that 'threatens social stability' or 'fosters ethnic discord'. To maximise efficiency, most content hosting services use automated 'keyword' systems that either prevent certain kinds of content from being published by users at all, or flag it for inspection by employees who then decide whether or not it needs to be deleted.

Chinese bloggers do not lie awake at night worrying about a possible knock on the door

A handful of Chinese bloggers have actually tried to sue their blog hosting services for breach of contract after experiencing this kind of censorship. Last year, Beijing-based lawyer Liu Xiaoyuan attempted to sue Sohu, one of China's largest blog-hosting companies, for censoring some of his blog posts analysing criminal court cases. He argued that his writings did not violate the 'terms of service' in which the user agrees not to post anti-government material, and thus Sohu was in breach of contract for censoring his postings. His lawsuit went nowhere. I asked a manager at Sohu about the case. Speaking on condition of anonymity he said: 'There's nothing we can do if we want to keep our business licence. We get calls from authorities every day telling us to take things down.'

The reality is that most Chinese Internet users are not using the censorship circumvention methods that Bill Xia describes in this issue [see pp114–120]. This is mainly due to lack of technical knowledge or fear of consequences, but also because in many cases people who have not spent much time overseas don't know what they're missing to begin with, and thus it does not occur to them to look. Recent Internet surveys conducted in

MADE IN CHINA

China show that most Chinese Internet users use the medium for entertainment purposes, not for news and politics. According to Guo Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who conducted a 2007 survey of Chinese Internet users in seven major Chinese cities for the Markle Foundation, 'The Chinese Internet is an entertainment superhighway, not an information superhighway.'

Thanks to this combination of ignorance, apathy, filtering of overseas websites and takedowns of politically unacceptable content from domestically hosted websites, censorship during the recent Tibetan protests was effective enough to present a largely pro-government perspective to the average Chinese Internet user. Chatroom and blog posts expressing irritation with the 'ungrateful' or 'violent' Tibetans were allowed to stand; most posts expressing alternative points of view or expressing sympathy for the protesters were quickly taken down, while most websites hosted overseas containing non-government sanctioned versions of events were filtered.

As Michael Anti points out, many members of China's small politically minded Internet user community have given up on blogs and chatrooms as a way to share politically sensitive information and have returned to email chains and lists instead. But this presents its own problems: if you use an email service hosted inside China, the email service provider is obligated to hand over your private account information to the Chinese police upon request. Several of China's jailed Internet writers were sentenced on 'evidence' obtained in this way, including Shi Tao and Wang Xiaoning, who are both serving ten-year sentences thanks at least in part to information handed over by Yahoo's Chinese email service. People then turn to overseas-hosted email services, but if these transmissions are not encrypted at both ends they can still be intercepted at the ISP and network level. Overseas email services can also be blocked: Internet users in China report that Yahoo! Groups were recently blocked in China, and at politically sensitive times in recent years, Chinese Internet users have reported problems accessing overseas web-based email services including Google's gmail and Microsoft's hotmail.

Despite all of these limitations, a Guangzhou-based blogger who writes under the pen name 'Bei Feng' ('north wind') – and who had to move his own blog to an overseas hosting service after it got censored domestically – argues that Chinese Internet writers still manage to push the boundaries of speech well beyond what is possible in print or broadcast. In the minutes, hours, or sometimes days between when a politically edgy item is first

posted and when it gets taken down by blog and chatroom administrators, Internet users have developed the habit of copying the material, saving it, and emailing it around. Others use euphemisms, homonyms, and historical allusions to make their meanings known without stating them directly. And while many bluntly political items do get censored, a vast range of discussion about social issues and public affairs is still possible. In the past few months, topics widely discussed – uncensored – in Chinese blogs and chatrooms include: the exposure of fakery on several official news photos, debate over the wisdom of new government regulations controlling online video, disappointment over the banning of popular *Lust Caution* actress Tang Wei, sympathy for the plight of migrant workers and their second-class status in Chinese cities, dissatisfaction about construction of Shanghai's new 'maglev' train and questions about the government's competence in managing transport bottlenecks during heavy winter snowstorms. It is difficult to publish or view content advocating multi-party democracy, supporting Tibet independence, criticising the government's crackdown against Falun Gong or questioning the government's motivations for holding the Olympics. But at the same time, a lively discourse about many public policy issues still manages to take place in Chinese cyberspace, as long as the discussion does not challenge the regime's fundamental legitimacy.

While many political items do get censored, a vast range of discussion is still possible

One of the many online conversations that you would never find in the Chinese newspapers was a proposal by the spy novelist and blogger Yang Hengjun – written on an uncensored blog – calling on the Chinese government to establish 'special political zones'. In the early 1980s, when Chinese economic reforms were just getting started, Deng Xiaoping established 'special economic zones' near the then-British and Portuguese colonies of Hong Kong and Macau as places where authorities could experiment with more liberal economic policies within a smaller population. Now, 30 years after the economic reforms began, those zones are indistinguishable from any of China's large coastal cities. Yang argued

MADE IN CHINA

provocatively that it's time to do the same with the political system – start out by experimenting in more limited regions. I asked Yang whether the Internet – now with more than 200 million Chinese users, less than 20 per cent of the Chinese population – might be considered a kind of 'special political zone'. 'Yes, you're right,' he agreed. 'Online and offline are two different worlds right now.'

People who have attended any of the three annual Chinese blogger conferences since the first meeting in 2005 describe the gatherings as a kind of 'Chinese geek Woodstock'. There are no drugs, no nudity and not even much in the way of politics. Most of the two-day conference is spent talking passionately about the technology that allows people to connect, communicate, and collaborate with one another in ways that were not possible before. A live chatroom is projected on a screen in which members of the audience poke fun at the panellists on stage – unheard of in any other kind of Chinese public meeting. This is a community of people, connected by the web, who are optimistic that the future is headed in their direction. While they know that the police keep an eye on their meetings and they have been warned to 'behave', these people do not consider themselves to be political dissidents. Nor do they spend much time worrying about what is not possible; they focus instead on maximising every inch of what might be possible. One day, perhaps, they will help to make the public discourse taking place offline in Chinese cities gradually indistinguishable from the one already happening online.

The Chinese government's system of censorship, control and propaganda may be full of holes, but it has so far prevented the Internet from being used as a viable tool for meaningful political opposition. Let's consider the regime's real goals: if they were after total control of all citizen activity, China would be North Korea. The Chinese Communist Party's primary goal is not to remain ideologically pure – Deng Xiaoping threw out that idea long ago. The goal today is to stay in power and maintain legitimacy. That means nipping organised dissent in the bud and preventing widespread unrest, while giving people enough space to make money, express and entertain themselves – and blow off steam online when they're angry so that they will feel less inclined to head to the streets.

At the same time, China's wired elites *are* able to engage in discussions about social issues and even many policy issues. As Isaac Mao likes to say: 'Before free speech, we need free thinking.' The Internet is incubating a generation of Chinese free thinkers – who have got used to debating and acknowledging different points of view – who may over time help to shape

a more pluralistic system for their country. But it will take time and there will be plenty of obstacles on the road ahead. Many fundamental arguments have yet to be had about precisely which road the Chinese people want to take. Until recently, those public debates were not possible thanks to media censorship. On the Internet, they are starting to happen. □

© Rebecca MacKinnon
DOI: 10.1080/03064220802081712

Rebecca MacKinnon is Assistant Professor at the University of Hong Kong's Journalism and Media Studies Centre. She was CNN Bureau chief in Beijing and then Tokyo from 1998 to 2003. Her current research focuses on the Internet in China, with reference to free speech and corporate responsibility