

FLIPPING THE SWITCH

It's not freedom of expression but freedom of thinking that China needs most and the Internet is the force for change, writes **Isaac Mao**

Although China is now part of the global economic order, the population still has no regular means of participating in the discussion of public affairs. This has meant an ever-widening gap between public policy and the reality of China today. At a time when more legislation is being drafted than ever before, the law is unable to address many of society's problems. As income disparities have reached abnormal levels, the government has chosen to silence the majority of the people. At the same time, certain groups with a vested interest in this state of affairs (including intellectuals) have chosen to keep quiet or to look on from the sidelines. The small number of rights activists, and those willing to speak out, have been put under pressure, sometimes to the extent of threats to their personal safety or that of their families. The mass media is under official control, able only to pass down a single view from the top. The commercial media is under pressure to do the same and run the risk of closure or the threat of 'rectification', bringing editors into line.

On the surface, this appears to be an issue of free expression, but it is in fact a problem of free thinking on a deeper social and psychological

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level – something I have termed ‘free-thinking disability’. This ‘disability’ is also at work in society’s unwritten rules. We are like fleas trapped under a glass, leaping up only to bounce off; even if the glass is later taken away we retain a conditioned response that makes us afraid to jump again.

This free-thinking disability is composed of many elements. There is the role of traditional Chinese culture and the effect of official propaganda and power, as well as problems with education. These various factors interlink in a way that reinforces their impact. In a country with a history of almost 2,000 years of feudalism, people have learned to keep their true thoughts to themselves, only revealing their more conformist opinions. Traditionally in China, there were many things that could only be spoken about in one’s own home, and there has been a lack of opportunity for public discourse. Although this improved during the democratic movements of the early 20th century, the Chinese lost the confidence to speak out after so many political campaigns encouraging public denunciation. The process of Reform and Opening Up has since changed China, and the economy is once more operating normally, but education continues to be traditionally didactic and has not adopted ideas that encourage independent thinking.

This means that even among the younger generation, the mentality is one of fixed thinking. The young are unable to break out of their own psychological framework, still less to express themselves spontaneously. If this is the norm, no matter how many minds are at work, they will not be capable of discriminating thought. The last 30 years of the 20th century were a vibrant time in the sciences, in communication and in the exchange of ideas, but the great majority of the Chinese public was unable to take any part in this transformation and missed the chance of interacting with the wider world.

Fortunately, China took advantage of the Internet when it became available to the public 13 years ago. It could even be said that China embraced its advent while failing to see the full potential. At first people saw the Internet as giving them access to a previously unknown world of news and knowledge unavailable inside China. Some of the things they read left them dumbfounded, but they gradually learned to select useful content. Some also found it to be a psychological outlet for things they had long suppressed. This brand new means of communication allowed people to find a new orientation, and they started to get to know a whole other world. People were presented with information and knowledge in a non-didactic format. It was like the arrival of hypermarkets in the lives of Chinese people, allowing them the freedom to choose. The impact of this new force brought

the worlds of entertainment and commerce up to speed with thinking in the rest of the world, all but doing away with old ideologies.

In lifestyle and consumerism, Chinese society quickly followed western patterns. In their view of family life, the Chinese have become steadily more tolerant of many things formerly thought incompatible with tradition. The government, however, was troubled by the spread of modern ideas in the humanities, along with democracy and freedom. Its response was to create the infamous Great Firewall as a project essential to its continued rule. This has continued to evolve in step with improvements in Internet technology and has, to an extent, succeeded in restricting access to thinking on political change, democratic ideas, citizens' rights movements and critical opinion from the outside world. This technical form of control is supported by ample human resources and adds to the psychological pressure on public free thinking.

However, the design and structure of the Internet makes it impossible to maintain a sealed system. In fact, when blogging tools were first introduced to China in 2002, we could see that these apparently insignificant personal platforms were going to tear up the old pattern of how information was accessed. Not only was everyone now a passive recipient of information, they could also use these low-cost tools to create and spread it. In theory, the central lockdown of information would no longer work effectively.

In the past, a few small voices had no hope of reaching a wider public and if they did manage to reach some kind of audience, they were easily controlled by the authorities, who could make them disappear from a given physical space. Web 2.0 tools have developed rapidly since 2002, expanding from text to multimedia, including images, video and sound. There are a range of tools that can be chosen to accomplish a given function and these can be interlinked like a network of water pipes. This now creates the possibility that information can spread to a wide range of different conduits before it comes to the attention of the authorities, reaching the outside world at rapid synchronous speed. These tools and services have ridden on the back of a kind of social network service (SNS) to spread all around the world, turning countless people into content creators; with a click of the mouse they can send information over their trusted networks.

User-generated content turned the Internet into a truly social medium. Next came micro-blogging tools, pushing the creation and sharing of information to new levels whilst shrinking the actual amount of information shared to just a few dozen words and links. At this scale, the monitoring system finds information virtually impossible to track and differentiate.

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It is like glass being shattered into a million pieces. There is no hope of catching them all with just one hand.

Blocking of information is meeting unprecedented challenges in the Web 2.0 age. Even with the most advanced keyword filtering technology and massive investment in the Great Firewall, people are bypassing it at will. They are putting all sorts of satirical content onto this supposedly locked-down network. Even the Great Firewall itself is openly discussed, jokingly referred to as the 'kung fu net' – [a play on the acronym for the Great Firewall, GFW – kung fu in Chinese is 'gong fu wang']. Those armed with this new knowledge go on to share it with others. As knowledge spreads in a more balanced way, Chinese people no longer live in a state of ignorance. More importantly, when people see others expressing different viewpoints forcefully, but rationally, and with factual support, they will themselves break free of their psychological framework and slowly learn how to genuinely express themselves. This is the social value that Web 2.0 creates beyond its technical worth – people gain access to the support of others via technological connections. The most important aspect of this is a subtle psychological effect I call 'sharism'.

The Internet was like the arrival of hypermarkets, allowing the freedom to choose

Sharing may appear to be perfectly natural and rational behaviour, but is in fact a habit: the human (or even animal) brain is naturally willing to share, because it can result in the direct positive outcome of feedback. In education, sharing is a fundamental way of learning. If, whenever children share, they are encouraged or rewarded for it, they will become more willing to share and explore, and will become more intelligent and creative.

As sharing behaviour accumulates, it produces a more intelligent, effective social decision-making process. Therefore if everybody had 'sharist' tendencies on their own initiative, it could not only expand society's capacity for knowledge, but could also resolve the sharpest conflicts through mutual dialogue. Such a society would be more stable and truly 'harmonious', in line with the state's declared development goal.



Blueprint for a new society?
Credit: Lou Linwei/Rex Features

Sharism cannot be imposed from the top down; it is built from the bottom up. This is the very reason that attempts in China to unify personal morality under the flag of idealism have repeatedly failed.

The creation of shared dreams is strongly connected to social trust: people will only create shared dreams when they have trusted spaces in which to do so. The majority of Web 2.0 spaces are built upon genuine social network connections with the construction of a trusted 'social space' between public and personal spaces, which has led to a large increase in people's motivation to share. Most social software distinguishes clearly between private personal space, trusted spaces, and public spaces, both protecting the rights and interests of the sharer and giving sharers a greater sense of security. Sharism is not simply a traditional, communist or socialist ideology: people find when sharing that they are not losing any rights to their property; they are merely allowing a greater number of people access to it. This is a free choice predicated upon respect for individual rights, and will naturally promote explosive growth of Internet content. The trend towards instantaneous sharing online has

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already begun to influence the composition of the global media space and increase the pace of social progress.

Chinese Internet users, of course, have experienced the greatest changes. Historically, the Chinese have most frequently encountered the negative consequences of sharing, leading to the stagnation of society as a whole. When they went online and initiated sharing through the construction of new social relationships, they received encouragement from all manner of social spaces, extending at times to financial rewards. This has allowed many ordinary people to become influential opinion leaders in their groups. As the number increases, it will subvert Chinese society, helping increase personal independence and interpersonal respect and forming a new network of social relationships. The words, actions, and shared content of any user can reach a greater audience through these new networks and create an expanded, sustained impact, becoming an ever greater source of discomfort for those in power.

Over the past few years, many Chinese people have come to realise the value of respectful sharism, because mutual sharing allows them to see society in its entirety. This realisation has helped them to reconsider the value of individual diversity and to learn to care for others. The notion that every person should receive respect will be a crucial building block of this new social structure, which will be more self-balancing, thanks to the close connections between people, than previous systems of pressure and control.

Between 2002 – the first year of the Age of the Blog – and 2007, Internet users have witnessed, time and again, the power of collective knowledge. Never again will they trust blindly in so-called elites and experts; still less will they bow before ‘authorities’. Though seemingly insignificant, sharism has broken down the forced frameworks of traditional social structures. While free of high-minded political aspirations, these new social forces can be directly applied to education, research, commerce, and social activities to create the kinds of new creativity and innovation that can begin to build miracles. The even greater value of sharism lies in its ability to allow these constantly connected trust networks to work in concert to reveal the true version of events and arrive at the most optimal solutions. Those who subscribe to the spirit of sharism already display a clear advantage in acquiring new knowledge and decision-making processes. More and more people with the ability to think individually have been able to flip the ‘sharing switch’ and are forming a new ‘social brain’.

This kind of accumulated intelligence is something that has never been seen before in the history of China and has the chance of giving Chinese

people the direct experience of the inner meaning of democracy. Together they are drafting the blueprint for future society, rather than slavishly walking at the plodding pace set by the government. This kind of thinking and actual practice has allowed Chinese intelligence to become part of global thinking and is creating an opportunity for promoting the common advancement of the international community. As it follows this trend, sharism will in future bring still greater change to China. Regardless of how this process takes place, we all have every reason to have an optimistic belief that Chinese society will not pass up yet another opportunity; it will face reality with more intelligence, humanity and courage and become a part of universal worldwide progress. □

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