

NOTES ON THE NET

Chinese blogger **Zhou Shuguang**'s journey through censorship, journalism and the Internet – from the Great Firewall to reporting banned stories

A lesson in censorship

In 2002, I hung around the online forum bbs.tencent.com. My first encounter with a BBS [bulletin board system] was also my first encounter with keyword filtering. On that website, all articles were censored by the software before they were posted. If certain sensitive words were found, such as '4 June', 'Falun Gong', 'hooker' or 'revolution', the piece would not be posted. Sometimes, if an article contained non-political sensitive words like 'fuck', it would still be posted, but the system would replace those words with the * symbol. So I frequently saw BBS articles that contained * symbols. Some people used other symbols to separate individual characters in words like 'revolution' to avoid being censored by the software. I began to understand online censorship from that point.

Propaganda rules

On occasion, I've seen netizens make BBS posts about 'propaganda notices' and 'propaganda rules' which include prohibitions against reporting on 'rights crusaders', religious issues, family planning, forced eviction

and demolition. The traditional Chinese media supervision framework consists of a strict registration and review system, a post-hoc censorship system, a personnel management system, and a permit system for practitioners, thereby exerting strict control over the dissemination of news.

How it works

All domestic websites must be registered, including non-commercial websites. The government assigns monitors to comment in chat rooms, direct the discussion and thereby influence public opinion. Server rooms control website content, under the supervision of the Internet Data Centre (IDC): if they discover sensitive content on websites under their jurisdiction, then the IDC will exert pressure to delete that content. ISPs and ICPs [internet content providers] are also tapped for content control. All sorts of online intimidation, complaints, administrative punishments and legal actions are employed to guarantee that all content is under the government's control.

Netizen opposition

In 2003, I read an article, 'Word filtering systems are unlawful, illegal, and unconstitutional', by noted legal activist Si Ning, who was active online. Through that article, I became aware that keyword filtering systems are crude, illegal management systems.

Discussion closed

On 13 September 2004, Peking University's Yita Hutu BBS was closed. There were no official media reports on this affair, and many forums and websites were pressured by the Communications Administration to filter the words 'Yita Hutu' and 'ytht' to prohibit discussion of the topic. China's netizens could find no related content on Baidu and a search on Google for 'Yita Hutu' would cause a page reset, making the page contents unviewable.

Searching for Mao Zedong

Subsequently, many netizens discovered that the names of national leaders, such as Mao Zedong, tripped a keyword filter during Google searches, rendering Google.com unreachable for several minutes.

Registration of non-commercial websites

The 'Non-Commercial Internet Service Record Management' regulations were passed by the 12th session of the Ministry of Information Industries on

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28 January 2005. They were subsequently made public and went into effect on 20 March 2005.

GFW

In 2004, many netizens discovered a new phrase: GFW, the Great Firewall. China's Internet censorship regime is relatively strict, but China's communications administrations only have jurisdiction over machines within the country. Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and foreign networks are not subject to restrictions. Hence the GFW, directed at 'non-compliant' foreign websites. It is a system spanning the machines on the country's top-level network, made up of sophisticated information filtering equipment bought by the Chinese government with taxpayers' money. The GFW can block netizens from browsing content. When the Chinese browse sensitive content overseas that the government does not wish them to see, the GFW will automatically cut off their connection to that website.

Google enters China

In 2005, Google entered China and set up the google.cn website to provide mainland users with a domestic web page search service, which would allow them to avoid disruption from the GFW.

Baidu doesn't have a cock

Baidu may claim to be Chinese, but in 2006, a netizen discovered that there was no rooster discussion group among the Chinese zodiac forums in Baidu's Post-Bar section. Baidu Post Bars are named using the topic keyword followed by the character 吧, 'bar'. All other animals had forums, like the Rat Bar (鼠吧, *shu ba*), but only the Cock Bar (鸡吧 *ji ba*) was missing. It may be due to the connotations of 'cock' (which, as in English, is slang for 'penis') that discussion of roosters is prohibited. Netizens therefore joke that without a Cock Bar, Baidu has been castrated. At the same time, they mock the Internet censorship system that has forced a commercial company to do such a ridiculous thing. Google is in the same situation: by setting up its mainland website, google.cn, it cannot hide from the government invitation to join the censorship system and screen names of people and events that the Chinese government deems sensitive.

The greatest nail house of Chongqing

In February 2007, a photograph appeared on the Chinese Internet: a two-storey brick building standing on top of a ten-metre-high mountain

of earth, surrounded by a massive pit. Netizens called this the ‘world’s greatest nail house’. The photo was taken beside the Yangjiaping light-rail station in Chongqing, which meant that all passengers going in and out of the station were able to see the real thing. The photo first circulated on the net, and then domestic and international media streamed to Chongqing to get a look at the nail house. Around 24 March, I noticed that state media reports had cooled down, blog reports had been deleted, and the special news section that the major portal Netease had created on the topic had been removed. I knew that the Publicity Department had begun to issue ‘propaganda notices’ to the domestic media to ‘guide public opinion’ and had started to block media reports on the Chongqing nail house. As an ordinary blogger with his own domain name, I was not restricted by the media system, so I decided to go to Chongqing to see the latest conditions of the nail house. When I arrived in Chongqing, I began to record what I saw and heard, and then presented the information I gathered to the readers of my blog. One week later, the owner of the nail house, Wu Ping, finally reached a compromise agreement that resolved the issue peacefully and legally. The same day the house was bulldozed, the website that I had set up in the USA, zuola.com, was blocked by the GFW.

Personal lockdown

In May 2007, during my one-month trip home from Chongqing, I gave lots of media interviews and was the subject of many reports. I was also contacted by a large number of rights activists, who invited me to visit their hometowns to help them come up with rights-protection plans. I began to write up news while I travelled. After I was interviewed by the American TV station NBC, my website IP was blocked by the GFW. I went through five IP address changes, but each new one was blocked within 24 hours, placing my website under an unprecedented lockdown.

Google’s co-operation with censorship

On 7 November 2007, I ran into Kai-Fu Lee, head of Google China, and asked him two questions. First, how could I keep from being switched to google.cn when trying to use google.com, and second, how to keep search results from violating local laws. Lee did not directly acknowledge co-operating with the Chinese government in carrying out online censorship. I posted the video of my interrogation on the Internet.





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Blockage of the Yilishen incident

On 20 November 2007, more than 10,000 ant farmers in Shenyang took to the streets calling for the government to protect their interests. But the local government began to block related information, and not a single domestic media organisation reported on the situation. The government even issued a notice to Beijing's lawyers, asking them not to take on cases related to Yilishen. On the 30th, I went to Shenyang to interview farmers to try and understand their situation. But as soon as I got to Shenyang, my calls were monitored, and on 3 December I was taken by Shenyang state security police to the nearby Dengta Public Security Bureau where I was held for 24 hours and made to write five statements. They confiscated 1,200 yuan, and then two plainclothes policemen accompanied me on the plane to escort me back home to Hunan.

Google filters my name

When the police banished me to Hunan after my investigation of the Shenyang Yilishen incident, my website was blocked twice. A search for my name on google.cn would produce the notice, 'Because of local rules and regulations, some search results have not been displayed'.

A force to be reckoned with

During the previous year of turbulent personal media reporting, I made full use of technical tricks to counter China's censorship and news blocks. I used my actions to prove the truth of my blog and to demonstrate that my ideas were legal and effective. Citizen journalism is a new rising force: I believe that it will play an important role in public affairs in the future. □

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Zhou Shuguang sprang to fame as the 'nail house blogger' and is one of China's most celebrated citizen journalists