The media, internet and governance in China

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> If there are any persons who contest a received opinion, or will do so if law or opinion will let them, let us thank them for it, open our minds to listen to them, and rejoice that there is someone to do for us what we otherwise ought, if we have any regard for either the certainty or the vitality of our convictions, to do with much greater labour for ourselves.
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> - John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*[1]

For students of how communications interact with political processes, actors and institutions, China offers a fascinating case-study. The People's Republic is today concerned with questions of governance, political and economic efficacy, authority and legitimacy that strike at the very core of its continued leadership. Given that these issues are affected by communications processes it is not surprising that the government devotes considerable attention to how the media should and do operate.

The glass is either half-empty or half-full depending on one's evaluation of the present situation. International web-sites, chat rooms, discussion groups and newspapers published outside China provide a colossal amount of (often anecdotal) evidence that there is reason to be pessimistic: almost daily we learn of Chinese journalists being sacked, imprisoned or beaten up; of newspapers forced to close because they have been too critical or have challenged an ideological position; of the Great Firewall that blocks access to the World Wide Web for information-starved Chinese.[2] *Southern Weekend* in 2001 was criticised for publishing reports that were detrimental to good governance, and so its editor-in-Chief was removed. In March 2003 the *21st Century World Herald* was closed; and in March 2004 staff at the *Southern Metropolitan Post* were subjected to official investigation. The list continues *ad nauseum*.

However, the glass is also half-full, and optimists point to recent reports that have suggested the outbreak of a 'guerrilla war' between journalists and the Publicity Department of the Communist Party, implying that the media are now prepared to challenge central control over their work. After all, they recognise a discrepancy between a state-controlled media increasingly dependent on ratings and advertising to survive. The 'guerrilla war; came to a head over the closure of *Bingdian* (*Freezing Point*), a popular supplement of the *China Youth Daily*. Thirteen veterans of politics and propaganda in China, including Mao Zedong's former secretary, responded by publishing a letter in which they called for the easing of censorship and new laws to protect press freedoms:

> History [they wrote] demonstrates that only a totalitarian system
>
> needs news censorship, out of the delusion that it can keep the public

locked in ignorance. Depriving the public of freedom of expression so nobody dares speak out will sow the seeds of disaster for political and social transition.

Optimists are inclined to perceive such outbursts as a crucial step in China's evolution of political communications. Communist Party veterans hold a revered position within political society, and their interventions contribute to a spirited open debate that is difficult for today's leaders to ignore. In other words, the media – their problems, need for reform and their explicit involvement in the political process – are added to the political agenda. In the immediate terms such eruptions of criticism may provoke the government to tighten its control over the communications process and expose journalists and media to ever tighter rules and regulations. The Chinese leadership is unlikely to create or tolerate the existence of a critical public sphere that will challenge party power and which may fulfil the expectations of democratic theorists.[3] However, there are potential long-term benefits if the critical media are prepared to wait. The reason is that the Chinese leadership may finally realise that free speech and freedom of publication are indispensable for governance, and are especially crucial for the continuing success of China's programmes of development and modernisation.

Governance and the Media

The centre of democratic procedure is inhabited by political communication. Political communication provides a vertical channel of dialogue and information between governments and governed, elected and the electors. Political communication helps to structure the participation and competition that characterise democracies. For supporters of direct democracy, a renewed system of political communication is the way to energise citizens in an increasingly apolitical environment.[4] They advocate greater opportunities for deliberation and discussion of political issues, popular mobilisation, and increasing the possibility to pressure governments (through devolution, referendums and grassroots civil-society activity). This, they say, is the recipe for the creation of a new civic-minded population:

> First, deliberation requires that one be well informed about proposed legislation. This includes being knowledgeable about competing - and minority - ideas, needs and perspectives. Second, it requires that this information be thoughtful and rationally considered rather than reacted to emotionally. ... Third, deliberation requires that one be able to exchange views on proposed legislation with other decision makers, if one chooses. Fourth, deliberation requires open-mindedness. One's preferences must be revisable in light of discussion, debate and new information.[5]

Dialogue is important for accountability as it requires opinions to be defended. In an ideal society, dialogue therefore encourages people to think through their views and have a

clearer understanding of why they hold those opinions. It is essential to the formation of public opinion that may conform to or challenge the prevailing political order.

This means that a fully-informed critical public opinion is essential for good governance. For democratic political systems that derive their authority from electoral procedures, the consent of the governed, and their performance between elections, a watchful public that is supported by media systems unafraid and able to scrutinise the decisions taken by politicians may moderate governments' behaviour. Transparency, accountability, critical engagement and challenging ideas all help to make governments work better and therefore better service providers. In short communication is crucial to the health of civic society and therefore to governance. There must be freedom of speech, of expression, and to dissent because cynicism nourishes democratic debates and processes.

So the media offer a voice to a range of actors located both inside and outside the political process, thus constructing a clearly-defined public sphere in which public opinion can be assembled, articulated and debated. However, if we are to fully understand the power of modern communications processes this simple idea requires elaboration. The power of the media is such a core concern in modern politics because we are compelled to acknowledge the media as political actors in their own right. No longer mere reporters or observers of political events, the media have assumed a central position within political society. Duncan McCargo has described how the media can be agents of stability (supporting the status quo), agents of restraint (checking and balancing political society) or agents of change. Through close examination of the media in selected Asian societies, McCargo demonstrates that these roles are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the

media perform all these roles at different political moments.[6] The merit of this agency based approach is not only that it recognises the power that the media possess, but also suggests that they are in constant strategic negotiation with other political actors, all enjoying access to their own resources.

The media do not like to admit they are political actors, as this would compromise the functions they believe they fulfil in a democratic society.[7] It also implies that there is little to separate the media – ostensibly working on behalf of the powerless and voiceless – from the politicians they try to expose. Only once they and we accept the (in many ways disturbing) notion that the media in democratic societies are political actors, do we understand that the media do not simply transmit information or offer entertainment, but rather have the propensity to be ideologically influential through the imagery they present. The media provide the cues and the frameworks which determine political discourse and which influence our perception and reaction to social and political reality. 'In the conduct of politics,' noted Colin Seymour-Ure in 2001, 'media are primary and political institutions secondary. The media can live without politics; indeed, surveys show that politics is one of the least appealing subjects to readers and audiences. But politics cannot live without the media'.[8]

So the media not only contribute to and provide a vital service *to* governance, they are political actors that are centrally involved *in* the process of governance. They help to disseminate the policies and positions determined by political elites and governments; and they frame the political debate and mobilise civil society around the requirements of the legislative process. In short they can and often do make and break governments.

The Media and Governance in China

Although they remain fundamental to the political process the media in China fulfil very different functions and responsibilities. Their autonomy is limited, and they have little opportunity to openly challenge state power; rather the Chinese media are required to play specific roles *on behalf* of the state. This facilitates authoritarian-based governance, but societies following a programme of modernisation and development require a more democratic model of media involvement in the political process.

It is difficult to imagine how authoritarian governments could survive without devoting serious resources to influencing and controlling systems of communication. Lacking the political legitimacy enjoyed by democratic governments, authoritarian regimes depend on communications to reinforce their political and coercive power. Systems of communication rarely extend beyond transmitting, framing and interpreting for the audience the decisions and actions of the government. They facilitate political recruitment, socialisation and mobilisation, hence communications have distinct social and political responsibilities of social control and nation-building that are consistent with the development priorities and ideological assumptions of the regime. For example, in 1999 C. Rozzario, Director of the Public Affairs Division (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs) justified his government's strict management of communications by claiming that, 'In a multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore, we cannot put at risk the racial

harmony and sense of public order, peace and safety built up over the years.'[9] Hence, the state called for the adoption of a nationalist ideology to forge a common bond among its people. This ideology, communicated through media and education, is built around five pillars that reflect the collectivism at the heart of Singapore's commitment to 'Asian values', namely nation, family, community, consensus, and harmony. This ideology is justified as a 'safeguard against undesirable values permeating from developed countries.'[10] Singapore is one of many authoritarian regimes, including China, that worry about the chaos that pluralism and freedom of information may introduce to their country, upsetting not only its development strategies, but also its cultural foundations (national communications are therefore tasked with resisting 'cultural imperialism'). Many regimes have therefore decided that nationalisation of the media allows the most efficient form of state management. Since 1960, the Cuban state has owned and controlled all media to serve its political agenda.[11] Suharto's government in Indonesia designed its national television network in 1962 around a specific developmental programme that required its people to identify closely with the regime. The Indonesian government required the media to help foster a sense of national unity, with television sets located in village halls across the country showing state-controlled programming.[12] This meant that the government decided broadcasting could encourage national identity and unity through the communal experience of watching centrally-planned programming.

Alternatively, state control of the media may help to de-politicise and demobilise a population, sapping their energy, generating passivity and depriving people not only of a voice, but also of stimuli that might activate them. In authoritarian Spain, for example, 'the primary result of media control was to secure the *passive acquiescence* of the

Spanish population rather than to resocialize the citizenry into active participatory roles' (emphasis added). [13] Hence, television stations produce and broadcast cheap entertainment programmes devoid of any meaningful content, or the government sanctions the controlled importation of (ostensibly) harmless foreign programmes. The 1970s British drama, *The Onedin Line* was one of the most popular programmes ever shown in Romania during the 1980s. Ceaucescu's decision to remove it from the airwaves in favour of North Korean-inspired propaganda was one factor that contributed to the activation of citizens against the regime. Gunther, Montero and Wert are particularly scathing about this attempt by the Spanish Fascist regime to create an inert audience: 'Regime maintenance,' they write, 'was facilitated by communications policies that effectively bored most Spaniards into passivity and acquiescence and deprived them of stimuli that might have triggered political mobilization.'[14] But as Sükösd notes, this strategy can backfire, as it did in Romania: in Hungary, the 'official importation of Western popular culture resulted in a spiralling of demand for the forbidden fruit'.[15] The forbidden fruit is always the most attractive variety, as the reaction in Chinese chat-rooms to the suppression of news about Zhao Ziyang's death demonstrates (see below).

Authoritarian governments exercise a variety of mechanisms to pressure, influence and, in the most extreme cases control communications, at the same time as demonstrating intolerance of alternative political opinions, autonomous and spontaneous popular mobilisation, information and channels of communication, but we can identify the following characteristics:

> ➢ Important appointments within the media are decided on political rather than professional grounds.

> ➢ The news agenda and news coverage are politically controlled to reflect the political agenda.

> ➢ Laws and legal systems are created to influence the media (targeting source, media actors and/or audiences).

> ➢ However, the media, journalists and editors are often subject to cycles of extra-legal abuse and intimidation.

> ➢ The idea that the media operate within an autonomous public sphere is absent.

> ➢ Civil society lacks autonomy; its mobilisation is tolerated only in service of the state-decided agenda.

> ➢ Primary groups too are expected to serve political functions; church, youth groups, schools, art, even family-life are pressed into service to communicate the state's political agenda.

Although it has embarked on a comprehensive programme of economic and social reform the Chinese communist regime preserves its authority in civil society and over the media anxious that liberalisation serve, not challenge, the regime's agenda (including economic modernisation and the preservation of the party's power[16]). The leadership has created new layers of bureaucracy to enforce their management of the media: In its March 2006 issue, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* revealed the existence of a 'shadowy group of Communist Party officials entrusted with tremendous power and almost no accountability' called the News Commentary Group (NCG, created in 1994) to 'clean

house at major newspapers.'[17] This group, claim the authors, was responsible for the closure of newspapers, including *Biangdian*, and the purging of editors documented at the beginning of this paper:

> The NCG … is a reinvention of censorship that allows the Party to ensure "guidance of public opinion" in the midst of an unruly market. Party leaders can use the NCG as their hatchet men and at the same time confuse, for the sake of China's international image, the issue of exactly where they stand on censorship.[18]

The Chinese media are required to disseminate the message as decided by the Communist Party,[19] a responsibility that The *People's Daily* reaffirmed in 2000:

> We should pay special attention to the use of modern tools of the mass media, such as the press, the radio, the television and the Internet, bring into play their role as the main channel of ideological education, and make continuous efforts to create lively forms that can reach people's ears, brain and heart.[20]

Earlier in October 1996, Jiang Zemin, then President of China, General Secretary of the Communist Party, and Chairman of the Military Commission toured the Chinese media to offer his guidance on their work and organisation. The *People's Daily* (3 October 1996) recorded his requirements under the title 'On the Correct Direction of Public Opinion':

1. The press must be guided by the Party's basic theory, basic line, and basic guideline, and keep politics, ideology and action in conformity with the Party Central Committee.

2. The press must firmly keep to the standpoint of the Party, adhere to principle, and take clear-cut stand on what to promote and what to oppose on cardinal issues of right and wrong.

3. The press must adhere to the party's guideline with stress on propaganda by positive examples, sing the praises of people's great achievements, and conduct the correct supervision of public opinion that should help the party and state to improve work and the style of leadership, solve problems, enhance unity, and safeguard stability.

4. The press must ... hold patriotism, collectivism and socialism on high, and use best things to arm, direct and mould the people.

Here, President Jiang affirmed beyond doubt that the Chinese media are, and must remain *part* of the political system; they must conform to party lines, directives and requirements, and they have a responsibility to work *with* the system, not against it.

Hu Jintao's accession to power as the CCP General Secretary in 2002 was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of optimism. In particular, he seemed committed to introducing more transparency in government, resulting in *Xinhua* publishing details of Politburo Standing Committee meetings. This connects with Hu's agenda to focus more than his predecessors on the growing wealth gap and the problems of uneven development (as suggested by reports of the Tenth National People's Congress in March 2006). Recognising that corruption is also a hindrance to governance print and media journalists have been encouraged to investigate allegations of corruption and mismanagement of local affairs by local officials, though criticism of national leaders remains prohibited. China's handling of the SARS crisis in 2003 was a turning point for the government-media interface as the problems of a tightly-controlled media were exposed to international scrutiny.

At the same time, we must accept that Hu Jintao is anything but a liberal and has maintained the characteristic hard-line of communist practice where political reforms are concerned. Rather, Hu's goal is the strengthening of the Communist party to make it more efficient. As we observed in the Introduction media censorship has not abated; rather it has increased with the government tightening its grip over newspapers and television stations in often innovative ways. Websites are now more frequently blocked than previously or are made to compromise their objectivity before being allowed to enter

the lucrative Chinese market (such as Google). Filtering software allows a greater degree of control over the web pages that surfers can access, while a so-called internet police force trawls the web for subversive content. Meanwhile, in November 2005 the *South China Morning Post*, published in Hong Kong, learned that the Publicity department of the Chinese government had ordered newspapers to seek approval from authorities before publishing reports on new outbreaks of the disease or any deaths.[21] Perhaps most disturbing are published allegations that Hu instructed propaganda officials in September 2004 that they should learn from Cuba and North Korea, two political systems not renowned for their records of good governance.

Moreover a succession of ambiguous regulations (including Articles 51, 53 and 54 of the Constitution, the 1989 Protection of National Secrets Law and the 1992 Regulation on the Protection of Secrets for News and Publication) actively discourage journalists from reporting and publishing information that might actually contribute to better governance. While the vagueness of this legislation is already a serious barrier to full reporting, the cost of navigating the bureaucracy – and thereby potentially exposing oneself to the charge of criminal activity – can be too high, making journalists over cautious and too eager to engage in self-censorship (exacerbated by the Sword of Damacles wielded by the News Commentary Group).[22] Typically confusing were Premier Wen Jiabao's remarks at the conclusion of the 10th National People's Congress on 14 March 2006:

A people's government should accept the democratic supervision of the people …
Only if a government is subject to the supervision of the people will it not dare to

be indolent. [But] Every citizen must also consciously abide by the law and order, and must protect the interests of the country, society and the collective. … The websites should be able to convey the right message and information. The websites should refrain from misleading the public or exerting an adverse impact on social and public order …

Every citizen in this country has the freedom of speech and freedom of publishing. At the same time, every citizen in this country needs to abide by the laws and safeguard the national and social interests. … we … need to educate and properly guide the general public so that they can more and more realise that their legitimate concerns need to be expressed through legal channels and in lawful formats.[23]

The statement lacks clarity and precision, deliberately leaving arbitrary what is permissible and how prohibited activity is defined. This is a classic technique adopted by authoritarian governments at all times and in all places, regardless of ideology. It helps strong government but not good governance.

Governments wishing to control the flow of information in the service of their authoritarian agendas face considerable risks. In particular, they are exposed to the pressures exerted by modern communications technologies which make increasingly difficult the opportunity to hermetically seal their borders and prevent their citizens from

receiving and conveying uncomfortable news and information. The short-wave radio, for example, was a source of alternative information throughout the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War.[24] As I discovered in my earlier research on international communication in that period, audiences have a stubborn curiosity about information that governments do not allow them to receive and will actively seek out alternative sources of information, often at considerable risk to their own safety. This is as true in 2006 as it was in 1956. For instance, anecdotal evidence available to researchers today suggests that the Chinese government's blatant media censorship only whets the popular appetite for forbidden information. When Zhao Ziyang, to many a hero of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, died after fifteen years of house arrest in January 2005, the Chinese government controlled coverage of his passing and his funeral. Information was scarce: 'I live in Guangzhou, and that night I wasn't able to access two Hong Kong TV stations, so I realised immediately that something major had happened. …'; ' … today … my grandmother said, "Zhao Ziyang died, why isn't the news or the papers reporting it?" I was curious, so I went searching on the Internet, but I found I couldn't open many Web sites, which made me think something was strange. …'; 'This morning, I couldn't connect to any overseas web sites, and I realised that something had happened …'; 'Putting aside Zhao's merits and faults for the time being, we have already completely lost the right to speak, and to hear about him! What kind of world is this?'[25] These concerns surfaced in chatrooms and on other discussion sites on the Internet, suggesting that the information revolution may continue the trends set by shortwave radio and help curious users circumvent the officially managed media.

China, the internet and public space

A striking feature of political life in China is the growing evidence that the Communist party's governance is increasingly challenged by a progressively vocal civil society. However, this civil society's critical voice is not present in the newspapers or on Chinese television, for few independent public spaces exit within the mainstream media environment to lend them the autonomy required by a questioning critical media. Rather, the Chinese are discovering new public spheres to engage with each other and with the political system, and the internet is increasing in popularity and use as a space in which the public may express their restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Since its invention the internet has been associated with democratic political communication. One of the most vocal optimist for the power of the internet, Harold Rhieingold, noted in 1993: 'The internet … if properly understood an defended and understood by enough citizens, does have democratising potential in the same way that alphabets and printing presses had democratising potential'.[26] The widespread use and potential of the internet (along with other new information communication technologies, such as mobile telephones and SMS messaging) has suggested nothing less than a revolution in political communication: its speed, promise of greater levels of interactivity and connectivity, the absence of hierarchies and the possibilities offered by an unfettered and unmediated source of communication have together contributed to the internet's appeal to democratic theory. Idealists claim that the internet has the capacity to transform political life by creating networks of globally or locally active citizens and by developing public spheres where they can participate in decision-making and help set the political

agenda.[27] They believe that the internet offers the opportunity to rejuvenate direct democracy through the creation of 'virtual forums' or new public spaces. This is because the internet bestows upon civil society a selection of fundamentally new communication strategies that have the capacity to transform their more traditional approaches to political behaviour. Groups can and do use internet technologies to mobilise support on a national, regional and even global scale, and can do so with less financial resources and attention to the demands of other electronic media. At the same time, social movements can despatch and publish their information, material, letters of protest, communiqués and press releases quickly and, because of the precise targeting allowed, efficiently to media organisations, governments, corporations and possible sympathisers. Vast political 'rhizomes'[28] are created as groups share information, create links (virtual and real) with each other and post information about each other's activities on their own websites. It is therefore unsurprising that some have predicted the internet promises the dawn of a new political age. Grossman,[29] for example, theorised that after the great epochs of classical Greek and representative democracy, technological changes place us on the verge of a third new period of electronic or 'strong' democracy as described by Barber:

> Strong democracy is defined by politics in the participatory mode: literally it is self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough … Self-government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing civic participation in agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation …

… strong democracy relies on participation in an evolving problem-solving community …[where] … public ends … are literally forged through the act of public participation, created through public deliberation and common action …[30]

Embedded in this quotation is an assumption that a strong democracy based on participation, deliberation, and 'problem solving' can contribute to good governance. It is not difficult to see why advocates of the wider application of the internet in political life have anchored their beliefs in the normative standards offered by such thinkers as Barber. Particularly empowering is the opportunity for all users to be simultaneously author, publisher and audience of news, information and opinion in a global market place of ideas. This is realised most dramatically in the rapid emergence of the 'blogger' culture, the posting by anyone with access to the internet of online diaries that allow readers a glimpse into the lives of their authors. Bloggers can undermine official news sources and propaganda, and offer alternative perspectives on events from those provided by other media following their own news agendas and reporting stories according to particular framing devices. Most attractive about blogging is that it represents a genuine bottom-up process of unmediated and unfiltered communication. Bloggers can also challenge prevailing social orders.

And there is evidence (in addition to that offered by blogging) that the internet has evaded and undermined traditional forms of political control and challenge established patterns and hierarchies in the organisation, flow and content of political communication. Well documented, for example, is the way the Zapatista movement used the internet to bring international public pressure down on the Mexican government.[31]

Rheingold's assessment about the potential for empowerment through the internet is largely correct. In fact, we might go further and note that internet use and availability have proliferated at a faster pace than previous communications inventions: in less than a decade the internet reached fifty million users worldwide; it took the telephone seventy-four years, radio thirty-eight years and television thirteen years to reach comparable levels of distribution.[32] However, there are serious flaws in the belief that the internet is universally empowering and democratising. First, the visionaries make two major assumptions: (1) that people want to participate in the political process; and (2) the current channels of political participation are defective. Both are common beliefs, and while I support the first if we stretch the definition of the political process beyond voting to include new social movements and civil society activity (the global protests against the 2003 war in Iraq is a good example), the second is more problematic. Traditional methods of participation are failing in some parts of the world and flourishing in others making generalisations impossible. The difficulty arises when, in accepting the first two assumptions, the idealists consent to a third: that the internet is the solution to these problems in political communication. How accurate is this?

Let us begin with the idea that everyone can be publisher and recipient. If this is the case, we are confronted not only with an explosion in the amount of information we must confront, sift and process[33] but with a fundamental question that defines the democratic approach to political communication: whose truth are we receiving? How can we check and guarantee the accuracy of the information? Does this mean that the responsibility for determining the truth falls to the consumers rather than producers? If

we are already concerned with how the traditional media have the capacity to distort the truth and present a one-dimensional, biased or superficial picture of political issues, processes and institutions, won't we become more anxious with information that is unmediated, unedited and unverifiable? The internet provides more information, but it does not guarantee the quality of information. Perhaps this really is a case of better the devil you know … ?

Second, available evidence seems to suggest that the internet confirms long-held suspicions that communications reinforce rather than change political behaviour, habits, attitudes and opinions. Those who use the internet for political purposes are already active and plugged into the political universe through regular use of such channels of communication as media, parties and groups. This reinforcement becomes a factor of access to the internet itself, the technology, and fluency and security in using it. Hence, critics lament the fact that cyberspace is dominated by the same social elites and actors we find in other areas of political life, and this provokes a suspicion that the internet allows groups to preach to the converted. After all, first one must be interested in a particular issue, group or party to take the time to find their website (we all have experience in using a search engine and know that finding the correct search term is only the beginning of what can be a frustrating process which may involve sifting through several thousand entries to find a relevant site), and it is unlikely given the strength of the reinforcement thesis of public opinion that these users will actively seek out the counter opinions offered by alternative groups and individuals.

We have to concede that the greatest obstacle to the democratic potential of the internet remains non-technological, namely governments who consider this

communications system a threat to their political power and thus seek to constrain its use. Of course, the glass may be half-full; this threat assessment may be a positive indication of the internet's potential strength. Governments only attempt to ban and suppress technologies, information and people they judge dangerous and subversive. Nevertheless, the reality of attempted political containment contradicts the utopian aspirations of Netizens who once believed that it is impossible to censor or regulate internet content, and that individual states had no authority or legitimacy in cyberspace. Across vast portions of the world, internet content or access to the internet is at best regulated and at worst denied by states pursuing interventionist or isolationist policies towards the information revolution. This situation also highlights how the vision of a globalised world characterised by the declining relevance and sovereignty of nation-states, especially in cyberspace, is misplaced. Rather, individual states are determined and able to control the internet within their own borders, reinforcing and preserving their dominion.

Many authoritarian governments, including the PRC, face a serious predicament. Pursuing developmental agendas requiring interaction with an increasingly open and interdependent world, these governments must embrace new communications technologies for their economic promise while minimising their democratic potential. Kalathil and Boas have baptised this a proactive strategy, with governments 'guiding Internet development and usage to promote their own interests and priorities.'[34] Regimes try to contain internet use among the intellectual and scientific elites, that is, those required to access and publish information on behalf of national development. Singapore's founder and first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, reinforced this agenda

when he admitted that only the 'top 3 to 5 percent of a society' is able to handle the chaos and plurality of information offered by the internet.[35] The rest of society must access the internet via 'proxy servers' that deny users the right to see officially blacklisted sites, a management strategy shared by other authoritarian governments.

Iran, too, has faced similar difficult choices. In 2001, the government closed most of Iran's internet cafés, known as 'Coffeenets'. The reason was a curious mixture of business concerns and political posturing: the popularity of VoiceChat, the instant messaging service that allows internet users actually to speak to each other meant that state-owned telephone companies started to lose revenue. Iran's theocracy had initially embraced the internet revolution, seeing the application of new technologies as a way of spreading the word of the Prophet, but then worried about the proliferation of the 'immoral' effects of western culture that internet users could easily download from unregulated sites. In May 2003, the Iranian government began to block pornographic and other sites it judged subversive or obscene. Around seventy young users were arrested in March 2003 for meeting through an illegal online dating service, clearly suggesting that the authorities had monitored the chatrooms used.[36]

Chinese sources (especially those produced by the government and its news agency, Xinhua, such as the *People's Daily* and the English-language *China Daily*) provide mounting evidence to suggest that the government is convinced the internet can make a positive contribution to the country's development. Hence, it is to China's credit that it has been at the forefront of the information revolution, promoting widespread access to the internet and investing US$500 billion in the information technology industry by the end of 2005 in order to provide access to their benefits across the entire

country. Yet the Chinese government is also infamous for the regulations it imposes on this information revolution, trying to 'limit the medium's potential challenges through a combination of content filtering, monitoring, deterrence and the promotion of self-censorship'.[37] Internet cafes are required to use software that restricts access to particular websites and to keep records of their users and the sites they have visited. These measures outwardly undermine the principle that the internet is a technology free from interference.

When one considers the way some scholars and observers have discussed the potential impact of the internet, it is not difficult to see why China is worried. Among the first to pronounce on the democratising possibilities of the internet was US Secretary of State James Baker in 1991:

> No nation has yet discovered a way to import the world's goods and services while stopping foreign ideas at the border. It is in our interest that the next generation in China be engaged by the Information Age … For this we determine the US feels that the Internet and information technology is a way in which democratic ideas will flourish and assist in managing the change that will come some day.[38]

Baker was followed by Gordon C. Chang who, in his 2001 book predicting *The Coming Collapse of China*, noted that 'the regime may patrol cyberspace,' but 'it cannot help but be changed by the process.'[39] Jianhi Bi concurred, suggesting that China's need to enter the information age would collide with the Communist party's determination to preserve its power, concluding that political change was inevitable.[40] With so many suggesting

that the internet will force the eventual collapse of the Chinese communist party, it is little wonder that the regime feels under siege. It therefore imposes control on internet use, believing that hostile nation-states might harness the internet in a propaganda offensive, and therefore China must be 'battle-ready' to meet that threat.[41] In 2000, the Chinese State Council approved the 'Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services', and it makes interesting reading. This lists the web content that the Chinese government has declared illegal, including: information considered contrary to constitutional provisions; information that endangers national security; information that threatens national honour; information that spreads rumours or undermines social stability; other information prohibited by the law and/or administrative regulations. In other words, the regulations lack specificity – a common technique whereby authoritarian states are able to exercise political expediency. As in other media systems this ambiguous legal framework, reinforced by familiarity with the severe penalties for violation, encourages a culture of self-censorship. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the regulations have instilled a sense of caution among Chinese internet users in the services they access; internet providers are equally cautious about the information they publish on their websites.

Yet there are grounds for optimism. A growing body of factual-based evidence suggests that Chinese internet users are both circumventing restrictions and forcing the government to follow discourses that are determined and shaped by popular opinion expressed online. The downing of a US spy-plane on Hainan island in April 2001 generated what we might consider some of the most critical discussions allowed in China. These completely changed the government's official response to this dramatic event and

created a new momentum of nationalism that the government at first had tried to avoid.[42] Moreover, the death of Zhao Ziyang in January 2005 demonstrated the internet's potential to ferret out forbidden information and express grievances with government-controlled censorship: the internet 'has only endowed citizens with a heightened awareness of the amount of information that is being blocked.'[43]

The basis of communist party control over information is centralisation and vertical communication; the internet, however, is designed to facilitate the *decentralised* spread of information and make possible *horizontal* communications. The lesson we can draw from this is that the internet may be a communications system that is completely incompatible with communist political and social organisation. The connectivity associated with the internet has the capacity to break down spatial and temporal relevance while undermining existing hierarchies. Predictably, these tensions worry governments, such as the Chinese Communist Party, that are determined to maintain a grip, however tenuous, on large populations.[44]

We can also learn another sobering lesson from the Chinese experience. The argument for the emancipating power of the internet is attractive and exciting but not particularly convincing nor grounded in empirical evidence. While it is possible to find a correlation between access to the internet and political freedom, it is less easy to find proof of *causation*. It is one thing to say the internet reduces the ability of states to check and control flows of information, but it is quite another to claim that the internet weakens or reduces the political power of states. While great swathes of the democratic and non-democratic world remain outside the internet revolution (either by political choice or economic necessity) democratic forces cannot depend on the internet to engineer political

change. For democratisation to occur there needs to be a whole series of other changes taking place within society, such as freedom of the press, of assembly, electoral competition and accountability. In other words, the internet is not necessarily liberating, empowering or democratising, but it can help to strengthen governance and the institutions charged with the task of government and civil administration.

The momentum for political change lies with other factors, particularly with the choices made by political elites or within civil society. The internet may contribute to the mobilisation of these forces and the distribution of ideas – little more. Certainly Harry Rheingold, too often falsely criticised as the father of the utopian approach to the internet, provides a fitting summary of why the internet is limited as an instrument of civic renewal:

> We temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding to our lives and might help revitalise the public sphere. The same tool, improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny.[45]

Conclusions

We are faced in China by a complex network of contradictions: an open economy, a closed political system; an economic miracle based on market forces that depend on the free flow of information, ideas and debate, but an environment where the flow of information is tightly controlled; a government committed to the potential of the internet

as a tool of governance, but also anxious to restrain the use of the internet and contain its power. Ultimately the problem for Chinese-style governance is that the CCP now bases its legitimacy on performance and delivery, not on dogma,[46] but as the existence of the News Commentary Group demonstrates is still willing to use dogmatic methods of exercising power. Chinese face a growing social divide that aggravates social tension, and thus the discrepancy between the message and reality becomes ever more apparent, thus creating a credibility gap. The forces that the Chinese government has unleashed in developing the economy have also planted the seeds of social unrest. Some might argue they have always been present, just contained. However, in an age of global media with information immediately available to everyone with access to a computer – and despite the Chinese government's best attempts it *is* possible to circumvent the Great Firewall - it is becoming less and less easy to manage information and the new public spaces that are materialising in cyberspace. Michel Hockx is correct when he says that internet censorship 'does not necessarily confront Chinese writers and readers with an unfamiliar situation. Censorship is the norm, rather than the exception.'[47] But this should not and does not preclude value judgement of censorship or the possibility of change. Censorship may be 'a fact of life' and as observers we may be guilty of 'foregrounding censorship' which means 'highlighting what does not appear on the Chinese internet' and drawing attention away 'from what does appear'.[48] But the mechanisms of censorship reveal much about the architecture of government, elite opinion, and the perception of the power of communications. In accepting censorship as the norm we are in danger of overlooking one important detail: What is good for governance in China – the free flow of information and ideas – is ultimately bad for the Chinese government. With the

proliferation of media, publishers and audiences, and a print industry ever more determined to challenge the government (as demonstrated by the example of *Bingdian*), a centrally-created and disseminated message is unable to compensate a society ever more willing to protest and express their grievances in public spaces.

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