Virtual China: The Internet as Threat or Opportunity?

Gary D. Rawnsley
Professor of Asian International Communications
Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds

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This paper assesses the challenges that China, its government and people, face by embracing the internet. It considers how a state apparatus determined to cling on to power and contain the democratic potential of the information revolution is increasingly challenged by a dispersed and fragmented, yet vocal and politically agitated 'critical mass' (Gilley, 2004:72) equally determined to balance and sometimes confront the Communist Party's monopoly on communication. This brings to the surface critical questions about the authority over discourse and narrative in modern China, and presents for governance there serious problems and opportunities in equal measure.

Governance in the Harmonious Society

In February 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao called for the creation of a 'harmonious society' which would include 'democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality' (Chindaily.com, 7 February 2005):

> Such a harmonious society will give full scope to people's intelligence and creativity, enable all the people to share the social wealth created in reform and

> development, and forge an ever closer relationship between the people and government, and result in lasting stability and unity … (ibid).

One of the architects of the harmonious society and an adviser to the Communist Party's Politburo, Jing Tiankui of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences described its foundation as a 'government that commits itself to a co-operative and equal relationship with the diverse groups that make up its population'. This was necessary, he said, because '[C]omplaints are arising and mutual trust is collapsing, while "relations between the government and the people are being threatened"' (Chinadaily.com, 8 March 2005). A less politically loaded assessment of the problem was offered by Kenneth Lieberthal in 2004 when he identified the most serious difficulties facing governance in China, and in doing so reflexively described the need for the harmonious society: Under the conditions created by the economic reforms, he wrote, Chinese people

> act primarily according to their interests … One unintended result of this … has been a poverty of thinking about values and a major retreat in the efforts to nurture and shape the principles that guide behaviour. In lieu of serious attention to values, the political system has instead come to rely overwhelmingly on a combination of appealing to people's material interests or to their fear of punishment (2004:202).

The demand for the creation of the harmonious society, we might argue, reveals the return to addressing values and principles as an approach to governance.

Discussions about the harmonious society, while inevitably managed by the central government, nevertheless attest to the growing recognition of the underlying problems in modern China: poverty, rural-urban migration, unemployment, vast inequalities in wealth, impending environmental collapse and corruption all present urgent difficulties for governance. In the transition to a market economy based on decentralisation, financial incentives and the accumulation of wealth, and individualisation, the state is no longer in a position to impose its will on the people using its revolutionary legitimacy or by simply resorting to coercion. Effective governance in China has required the introduction of technical and institutional methods to facilitate development – privileging the 'expert' over 'red'. The possibilities of executing macro-control over a decentralised and increasingly fragmented system are diminishing. Modernisation is creating a revolution of rising expectations that, if not met, can lead to a serious credibility gap, which in turn erodes popular confidence in the government and damages governance.

The foundation of the harmonious society is 'stability' (*wending*) and a constant vigilance against 'chaos' or 'disorder' (*luan*). Stability has been at the top of the political agenda since the student unrest in 1989. Now, however, the calls for a harmonious society suggest that stability no longer means controlling the campuses and preventing calls for western-style democracy and electoral competition. Rather, the harmonious society addresses the problems that are a direct consequence of reforms that have generated undercurrents of primarily economic anxiety and frustration among the working class (Shue, 2004).

The internet presents a series of striking contradictions and grave challenges to a Chinese government trying to create a harmonious society and find new approaches to legitimacy. To what extent is the internet compatible with the aims of governance in a harmonious society? Does the internet undermine the premise of stability, or is the call for a harmonious society a reflection of problems to which the internet has contributed? And can the 'critical mass' use the internet to express its grievances, scrutinise the political elite, and ultimately overcome the fragmentary quality of opposition in China today?

The Chinese success story

The contradictions of governance in modern China are most apparent in cyberspace, in what we might call 'virtual China'. And to fully appreciate the scale and severity of these contradictions it is important that in the blizzard of bad-news stories about censorship[1] we do not lose sight of the progress that the Chinese government has made in accommodating and promoting new information technologies. The Chinese government has fully accepted that modernisation and economic development depend on becoming fully embedded in a globalised world; that it is no longer possible to avoid attachment to new global communications networks that facilitate the flows of information. To this end the Communist government in Beijing has been at the forefront of the information revolution, aiming to overcome the problems and frustrations associated with a bureaucracy that is increasingly viewed as distant from the people and the complexity

[1] Michel Hockx has written that internet censorship 'does not necessarily confront Chinese writers and readers with an unfamiliar situation. Censorship is the norm, rather than the exception' (2005:151). Censorship, he observes, is 'a fact of life' and we are too often guilty of 'foregrounding censorship' which means 'highlighting what does not appear on the Chinese internet' and drawing attention away 'from what does appear' (Ibid: 149).

that discredited the traditional channels of information. Beijing has demanded a comprehensive 'informatization' ('*xinxihua*') by promoting widespread access to the internet through massive investment in national infrastructure projects. By the end of 2005 the government had invested US$500 billion in the information technology industry to facilitate the provision of nation-wide access.[2] In addition Beijing, in pursuit of *toumingdu* (transparency), has benefited from the business community's application of the internet for commercial transactions and the delivery of services: e-commerce everywhere predates e-government. As early as 1993 all government offices were instructed to have an on-line presence that would facilitate interactivity, thus encouraging new ways of delivering government-related services. This was given a positive boost in 1999 with the launch of the Government Online Project (*zhengfu shangwan gongcheng*) that promoted the use of Chinese internet domains. In 1998, only 145 gov.cn sites were available on the World Wide Web; with support from the Government Online Project this soon increased to 1,470 sites representing 720 government departments, rising to 7,796 sites by 2003 (*People's Daily Online*, 8 March 2002). Moreover, the use of the internet as an asset in the economic development of China is indicated by the prominence devoted to information by policy-makers at the highest levels in their five year plans. The impact on governance has not gone unnoticed, as a report by the US Embassy in Beijing clearly suggests the increasing levels of *toumingdu*:

[2] The distribution of internet use and access across China is as expected. The heaviest concentration is in Beijing, Shanghai and along the eastern sea-board. Internet access becomes sparse as one travels west. For details, see the interactive maps available on http://www.nytimes.com/specials/chinarises/cityofdreams/index.html. Also see the reports published by the China Internet Network Information (CINN) available at http://www.cnnic.cn and Tang (2000).

> Chinese regulations have gone from being largely unpublished, confidential, in-house edicts … to published texts that are more detailed with each iteration. Some Chinese government agencies have even published proposed regulations online and asked for comments, although this is still very unusual (US Embassy, 2001).

The speed and scale of internet use in China is best represented in the following table:

Table 1:
Internet Growth in China: Total subscribers to internet services (millions), 1995-2002 (including Taiwan) (Donald & Benewick, 2005: 30)

1997	0.2
1998	0.7
1999	3.0
2000	9.0
2001	36.6
2002	52.5
2004	94.0[a]
2005	111.0[a]
2006	123.0[b]

a: Figures do not include Taiwan. Source: moldova.org, http://it.moldova.org/stiri/eng/8396/ accessed 9 November 2006
b: 18th Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China (July 2006), China Internet Network Information Centre, http://www.cnnic.cn

The figures reveal that the number of internet subscribers has increased at an extraordinary rate (China is second only to the United States in internet use). Keeping pace with this level of uptake has presented its own unique challenges for the government and governance in China. While embracing the internet's value as an indispensable instrument of social and economic development, the government has at the same time limited the internet's use, access, content and therefore potential to act as a viable competitor for political power. The government's concerns were first voiced in 1996,

only three years into the promotion of e-government, with the publication of the 'PRC Interim Regulations Governing the Management of International Computer Networks' (Tan, 1999). Given the stark contradictions that are present the question that confronts the government and every Chinese internet user is: Can internet technology be encouraged for one purpose and discouraged for another?

The Internet and Governance in China

In China, an example of a neo-authoritarian political system, systems of communications are required to assume specific responsibilities *on behalf* of the state; they are not expected to confront political power nor set the political agenda, and the state finds it extremely difficult to tolerate inquisitive and belligerent media. Deficient in the political (electoral) legitimacy enjoyed by democratic governments, authoritarian regimes structure their communications systems to reinforce their political and coercive power. While democratic communications are based on a vertical (two-way, government-citizens-government) and horizontal (citizens-citizens, ie. communications within civil society) flow of information and opinions, in authoritarian systems they rarely extend beyond transmitting, framing and interpreting for the audience the decisions and actions of the government (a vertical but one way – top-down – flow of information). As noted above the internet facilitates this vertical flow of information under the guise of e-government which encourages government agencies to post documents, regulations and policies, *but which still limits the level of popular interaction*. Hence we should note the implications of Lieberthal's otherwise sanguine observations:

> As compared with the period in the early stage of the reforms, problems are more thoroughly researched and receive fuller vetting internally before decisions are reached. Information is more widely available, opinions are more freely offered, and the statistical tools and models employed are more sophisticated. International technical advice is now available on everything … and is accorded significant attention (2004:202).

Lieberthal here describes a political system that is more open to information than at any time in the past, a development that will have beneficial consequences for governance. However, the implication is that this flow of information is limited to elite political society; the information is gathered and used for policy-making and there is an absence in Lieberthals' remarks of any consideration of public consultation.

Since it launched comprehensive economic and social changes in the mid-1980s China is now among a spectrum of authoritarian regimes that see the value of communications but worry about the chaos that pluralism and freedom of information may cause, upsetting not only its developmental strategies but also shaking its cultural and political foundations. It especially brings into sharp relief the problems of maintaining stability and creating a harmonious society. Moreover, it raises the possibility that the Chinese government would lose control of the discourse on the harmonious society and therefore also lose control of its reception, interpretation and implementation.

As we have noted above China does appreciate the benefits of communication to its programme of modernisation, but it clearly fears the potential consequences of free

communications on the political system. Thus China conforms to the 'pro-active' strategy discussed by Kalathil and Boas (2001) whereby governments 'guide' how the internet develops and is used to help fulfil policy requirements, particularly in the economy. And when one considers the provocative discussions about the internet in the west, a pro-active strategy of control is understandably attractive. Harold Rheingold, for example, has referred to the internet having 'democratising potential' (1993: 279). Among the first to articulate the democratising promise of the internet in China was US Secretary of State James Baker in 1991 who said 'It is in our interest that the next generation in China be engaged by the Information Age … 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 (Baker, 1991/1992: 16-17). Baker was followed by Gordon C. Chang and his prediction about *The Coming Collapse of China*. He noted that 'the regime may patrol cyberspace,' but 'it cannot help but be changed by the process' (Chang, 2001: 90). Jianhi Bi (2000: 421-41) agreed with this prophecy, and stated that China's dependence on the information age would inevitably collide with the Communist Party's determination to safeguard its power, causing political change. With so many predicting that the information revolution will force the eventual collapse of the Communist Party, the current siege mentality that appears to have gripped the Chinese government is understandable.

The question then is: When will China's political leadership realise that free speech and freedom of publication are indispensable for governance, and are especially crucial for the continuing success of China's modernisation and development? This is particularly pressing given the speed and scale of internet take-up across the country, a

development the government has encouraged provided it can be supervised. The internet is designed to facilitate the decentralised dissemination of information and make possible horizontal communications, practices that are essential for successful economic modernisation, but are completely incompatible with a system of governance based on vertical and centralised communication.

Managing the Internet

What makes the internet so attractive to liberals is its speed, the allure of greater levels of interactivity and connectivity, the (supposed) absence of hierarchies and, above all, the possibility of finally having at our disposal a truly free medium that is beyond the control of either media or governments. It is we are led to believe, a genuinely popular and empowering communications technology. In accessing the internet citizens can connect to and form global, regional and local networks to engage in debate, dialogue, exchange or even plot their linked political activity and thus help to set the political agenda. Vast political 'rhizomes' (Robinson, 2005) are formed as groups share information, create links (virtual and real) with each other and post information about each other's activities on their own websites. In short the internet creates 'virtual forums' or new public spaces, and can even attend to the renaissance of direct democracy.

Advocates of the internet as a medium for promoting democracy claim it can be most effective in facilitating the construction of an autonomous public sphere that encourages discourse within 'civil society', sometimes with a possibility that this will lead to political mobilisation. Users depend on cyberspace to bypass the official version of news and opinion, but are confronted by a raft of legislation and extra-legal measures

designed to curb their access. This presents a significant challenge for governance as, more than at any point in the past, new information technology allows citizens to find alternative information from across the globe, exposing them to new ideas and narratives. Centralised systems of governance are therefore under siege from rejuvenated civil societies harnessing the power of the internet to inform their opinions and organise their activities.

The Chinese government's reaction to the information revolution establishes that beyond a superficial level it is confused about how communications media, including the internet, is linked to governance. We have acknowledged that the government seems to recognise and accept the value of the internet but is still worried about its potential. For example, Premier Wen Jiabao issued a statement, reinforcing the principles of the harmonious society, at the close of the 10th National Congress in March 2006 in which he recognised 'A people's government should accept the democratic supervision of the people,' but added that 'Every citizen must also consciously abide by the law and order.' Websites, he said, 'should be able to convey the right message and information,' and people needed to be educated and 'properly guided' to understand how to use the media to express their concerns (*People's Daily*, 15 March 2006). On the surface this statement provides grounds for optimism, and the Premier's apparent commitment to freedom of speech and publication as a prerequisite for high-quality governance is encouraging. Yet the statement also lacks clarity, and I argue that such vagueness is a typical and deliberate method of maintaining state control. It supports strong government but not good governance in a society that is seeking to develop as a pivotal player in the globalised international arena.

This absence of lucidity is likewise noticeable in the 'Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services, approved by the Chinese State Council in 2000. This lists illegal web content the web, including information that is judged to diverge from the constitution, endanger national security, threaten national honour, spread rumours or undermine social stability, and any other information prohibited by the law and/or administrative regulations. In other words, the Chinese State Council has enacted a deliberately ambiguous legal framework that provides room for political expediency; and it has worked by creating a climate of self-censorship among internet users (as publishers and audience) to complement the elaborate architecture of state-managed censorship of information. Many Chinese internet users are understandably cautious about the websites they access, and internet providers are equally vigilant about the information they publish. The transparency and dialogue upon which good governance depends is absent.

Since accepting the need for embracing the internet the government has tried desperately to keep up with the proliferation of users, sites, chat-rooms and blogs. Since 2000 China's police force has established internet departments in more than 700 cities and provinces. Websites and emails are closely monitored by the 'net police' for 'heretical teachings or feudal superstitions' and information 'harmful to the dignity or interests of the state'. Since 2002, all internet service providers have been required to sign a form guaranteeing self-censorship before receiving permission to operate. Most famous is the 'Great Firewall' (as it is known to its detractors) or the 'Golden Shield' (the CCP's term), protecting the nine gateways that connect China to the World Wide Web. Internet cafes are required to use software that restricts access to particular prescribed websites,

and to register all users and the sites they visit. Between 6 and 8 September 2006 – in the space of just 48 hours – the Ministry of Public Security 'closed 320 "illegal" websites and suppressed 15,000 "items of hazardous information" on the Internet … Most were allegedly implicated in criminal activity such as online gambling or fraud, or the sale of arms, explosives or narcotics' (Reporters Without Borders, 2006).

Such drastic measures signal the internet's potential strength. Governments only attempt to control technologies, information and people they judge dangerous and subversive. Nevertheless, we are forced to concede that the ability to manage the internet undermines the utopian idea that it is impossible to censor or regulate internet content and that individual states lack authority and sovereignty in cyberspace. Individual states are determined to control the internet within their own borders, reinforcing and preserving their dominion at a time when we are told that globalisation is reducing the relevance of sovereignty.

The problem with trying to control the flow of information in a globalised communication-led world is that people have a remarkable tenacity to seek information which is being denied to them. As technology advances it is becoming incredibly difficult to seal one's borders and prevent access to alternative sources of information and opinion (though the PRC has developed elaborate technological methods involving huge manpower to hunt and close proxy servers that are located inside China and block those situated outside its borders). Audiences possess a stubborn curiosity about news that their government does not allow them to receive and so will actively search for alternative sources, often at considerable risk to their own lives. For example we have evidence that the Chinese government's blatant censorship practices only whet the popular appetite for

forbidden information. When Zhao Ziyang, considered by many a hero after his intervention in the 1989 student-led demonstrations, died in 2005 after fifteen years of house arrest, the Chinese government controlled news about both his passing and his funeral. But the Chinese people were not deterred and took to the internet not only for details, but to comment on the censorship (Parker, 2005). Remarks posted in blogs, chat-rooms and other discussion sites after Zhao's death are especially notable for two reasons. First, the comments demonstrate that the information revolution helps curious users circumvent the officially managed media and offers alternative sources of news, information and opinion. This is a crucial issue for governance in China because access to alternative sources of information means that observers are now discussing the existence of a credibility gap whereby the news and information Chinese are obtaining from the internet conflict with the narrative circulating in the official media. The credibility gap exposes and discredits the government, and undermines popular confidence in the political elite.

Second, it is clear from the evidence that the internet is providing new public spaces for participants to discuss the state's management of the media. In other words, through the internet China is experiencing a rejuvenation of social-civic engagement that discusses and debates the control of the flow of information as a political issue. Again popular trust and confidence in the system are shaken, thus disrupting governance and progress towards a harmonious society.

That the control of information is a political issue is demonstrated by the events of July 2006 when Century China, a web site and chat forum (Century Salon) popular with liberal critics of the government, was closed by the authorities. The reasons, stated in a

notice issued on 19 July by the Communication Administration Bureau was that this website 'illegally provides Internet news without proper qualifications' and has violated the 'Regulations of Internet News Service' and Article 19 of the 'Regulations of Internet Information Service' – specifically that Century China had not obtained a licence to provide news information (reinforcing the subtle and legal methods the authorities use). One hundred (very brave) writers, scholars and lawyers from both inside and outside China signed a letter that was subsequently published in the *New York Review of Books* (2 November 2006). The letter was very candid:

> Throughout history oppressive governments worldwide have suppressed freedom of speech, but in today's world, thus type of suppression is becoming increasingly intolerable. The shutdown of Century China is just another instance of the Chinese government's suppression of the freedom of its people. Therefore we must stage a focused and unyielding protest against the government's abuse of power (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19517).

So despite the obstacles many Chinese internet users are both circumventing restrictions *and* forcing the government to follow discourses that begin in popular discussions on-line. The most famous example occurred when the Chinese airforce shot down a US spy-plane over Hanian island in April 2001. This story first appeared in the *Qiangguo* (*Strong Nation*) chatroom attached to the *People's Daily* newspaper. Most stories that materialise here begin as postings of news reports lifted from the western press. Usually these may be news stories that are not reported in the Chinese media or their coverage is delayed. The story of the spy-plane, for example, was lifted from Associated Press reports and

appeared in this chatroom two hours before the first official Chinese reports were published. The internet is therefore able to steal a march on the official media and force the press to respond to an alternative agenda, rather than give the media the room and freedom (under guidance from the authorities) to set the agenda themselves (Gries, 2004b). The online discussion followed a hard-line nationalist discourse that the government had at first tried to avoid, but eventually had to accept (Gries, 2004a). In other words, internet users were able to influence the political agenda and force the government through the force of popular pressure to respond to the event in a manner different to that it had originally intended.[3] One can speculate if the internet will therefore become a tool that is as important for the government's supporters as it is for its critics, and will have consequences for the mobilisation of popular sentiment around a distinctly nationalist agenda. Again this has implications for governance, since it implies that the Chinese communist style of governance is under threat from the ability to access multiple sources of information that challenge the official narratives as it discovered to its cost during the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Guangdong in November 2002 when new methods of communication, namely text messaging on mobile telephones, email and the internet alerted users to first the existence and second the magnitude of the problem. Credibility gaps have existed for as long as governments have tried to manage information, but they only became part of conventional discourse during the Vietnam war. In other words, credibility gaps are not new. However, new communications technologies with their global instantaneous reach do make it much easier than at any time in the past to identify and expose credibility gaps, which means it

[3] A comprehensive discussion of this incident that tracks the response of the official media with that of chatrooms is provided by Li, Xuan and Kluver (2003), pp.143-158.

is becoming increasingly possible to force governments on the defensive and challenge their approaches to governance.

Chinese voices: the blogger culture

Most appealing to those who have seized the opportunities presented by the internet – and therefore most worrying to authoritarian governments like China – is its capacity to empower individuals: the internet has the ability to turn even the most casual users into author, publisher and audience of news, information and opinion. This is, of course, the foundation of the 'blogger' culture that has given us a glimpse of life in closed or repressed societies (Iran, China), or on the home-front of cities under military attack (Iraq, 2003, Lebanon 2006). Many of these blogs – online reports, diaries and simple musings - have been published and have become best-sellers in many high-street bookshops in the west, signifying the cross-over of formats in a multi-media age. They provide an alternative perspective on events from those offered by other media sources; they set their own agendas; and most important (and most disturbing for authoritarian governments) is that blogging is an authentic bottom-up process of unmediated and unfiltered communication that may challenge established political orders and styles of governance.

Throughout China the blogging culture is increasing in popularity, spurred by the strong growth in broadband internet usage. According to research conducted at Tsinghua University in Beijing there are now 36.8 million blog sites and 16 million bloggers in China (French, 2006). In China the most popular blogs have discussed sex, and the sexual exploits of bloggers are regularly posted. Perhaps the most famous is Mu Zimei, a twenty-five year old (alleged) Communist Party member who runs an anonymous

sexually provocative blog. Although not directly political such blogs can present a challenge to the moral codes of Chinese society and undermine the traditional culture of deference and respect for taboos: If such private and provocative acts as sexual intercourse can be openly discussed, why can't politics? In this over-sensitive climate it is not surprising that more overtly political blogs have been closed, and the best documented are those written and posted by Tibetan writers and open supporters of the Dalai Lama.[4]

The possible political consequences of uncontrolled blogging have worried the Chinese government; it is a challenge to governance and the government because it raises a fundamental question about official and unofficial narrative. Who is allowed to tell the real story? Whose voice is heard? Whose version of history is legitimate and accepted as such? How do the powerful deal with narratives that challenge the official version of a story? The anxiety is suggested by comments published by *Xinhua*, China's official news agency, that some bloggers used the protection offered by anonymity to disseminate 'irresponsible and untrue' information. Bloggers are, said *Xinhua*, a 'bad influence.' In response the authorities in Beijing have tried to design ways of managing this new form of communication, for example, by requiring bloggers to register under their real names, but still allowing them to write under pseudonyms, thus reducing the anonymity that is fundamental to the blogger culture. How does this impact on governance? If one is using democratic approaches to governance, then blogging is a testament to the power of the free flow of information; while it does not guarantee an audience, especially among political or social elites, it nevertheless represents confidence in the democratic political

[4] 'Banned, Blocked Tibetan Writer Vows to Speak Out in China', www.rfa.org, available at http://newsblaze.com/story/20060811842424nnnn.nb/newsblaze/TOPSTORY/Top-Stories.html, 1 August 2006.

system. The government does not feel threatened and therefore there exists mutual trust in the system between government and citizens. In contrast a Chinese authoritarian view of governance inevitably perceives blogging as a menace that potentially challenges the stable social order that the political system views as essential for further economic development.

Conclusions

The Chinese government faces a critical short-term dilemma. Its legitimacy is based increasingly on its performance and delivering benefits and services to help alleviate the transition to a market-led economic system, and less on doctrine or revolutionary heritage. Yet this must transform the Chinese style of governance, for a Communist style political and social system is ultimately incompatible with market (Capitalist) forms of economic organisation which are embedded in and depend on global information networks. In its quest for a harmonious society the government is still willing to use coercive methods of social control, or deliberately vague and arbitrary regulations to maintain its monopoly on power, so the potential crisis in governance grows ever closer. In an age of global media with information available to everyone with access to a computer – even the Great Firewall is not impermeable – it is becoming less and less easy to manage the flow of information and control the materialisation of new public spaces in cyberspace. The architecture of this control reveals much about the nature of government, elite opinion and the power of communications. What is good for governance in China – the free flow of information and ideas – is ultimately corrosive for the Chinese government. With the rapid proliferation and appropriation of new communications technologies and the

confusion of author, publisher and audience, Chinese-style governance is facing an ever more articulate, opinionated and daring public sphere.

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