

# Opening Up Authoritarian Regime via the INTERNET

- A Inside Look of the China Experience

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The information communication technology (ICT) revolution, namely the birth and development of Internet technology, has been cheered by many for its huge potential effects on political transitions in authoritarian regimes like China. Optimists, including both president Bush and former president Clinton, claim that with China permitting thousands of Web sites to bloom, liberty should soon be squiggling in, despite Beijing's crude attempts at control. Former president Clinton once stated, "In the new century, liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem... We know how much the Internet has changed America, and we are already an open society. Imagine how much it could change China. Now, there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet—good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jello to the wall."

However, pessimistic views are not alone [1]. Many scholars have serious doubts about what the Internet can do to democratize a giant nation like China. In their article [2], William J. Drake, Shanthi Kalathil, and Taylor C. Boas of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace believe there is no valid scientific evidence to prove the Internet is an irresistible force for democracy that will undermine authoritarian regimes. Nina Hachigian, in her article "China's Cyber Strategy" appeared in *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2001, argues the Internet could be extremely helpful ONLY at some critical points to trigger a democratic transition. She states "The power shifts wrought by the Internet will surface clearly only during an economic or political crisis in a future China where the Internet is far more pervasive. At that time, the Internet will fuel discontent and could be the linchpin to a successful challenge to party rule." However, before the society reaches a critical crisis point, the Internet might not help much in building democracy.

In my opinion, the views expressed by optimists and pessimistic both are biased. The Internet is only a few years old. During these few years, we have not yet witnessed any breakdown of an authoritarian regime that was caused by the Internet. But, this cannot prove the Internet's incapability in helping democratization either. First, during a short period of time, it is unrealistic to expect for any forces including economic force to produce certain huge effects that can break down a regime or lead a polity to install elections. Second, the Internet is only a tool. How effective it is will depend on the people and groups using it. Often, it will take several years for democracy builders to fully understand and master a new tool and its power. However, if democracy (as defined here) consists of both political competitiveness and liberalization, there is evidence that the Internet has accelerated political liberalization and may eventually bring political competitiveness into an authoritarian regime like China. Based on our observation, the Internet has already played important roles in opening up China to the west, and in building up elements for democracy. As pointed out by Mr. Carl Gershman president of the National Endowment of Democracy, Internet "is already exercising a powerful

influence in the field of democracy promotion.” [3] Based on my preliminary study, the Internet has already produced the following impacts on China’s transition: (a) breaking government’s information monopoly, (b) empowering opposition forces, (c) facilitating political education, (d) empowering civil society, (e) providing a virtual battlefield between opposition and the government.

## **1, ICT’s Impacts in China 1997-2001**

Chinese democracy builders as well as the government consider monopoly of information, monopoly of organizations, pro-authoritarian political culture as the major power bases of China’s authoritarian regime [4]. Democracy builders constantly seek ways to weaken the above-mentioned bases, and at the same time to build pro-democracy values and institutions. Specifically, besides using ICT in spreading democratic values, pro-democracy groups in China have already used ICT to challenge the above mentioned authoritarian regime power bases, and to empower opposition groups and civil society as detailed in the followings.

First, ICT provides tools for democracy builders to establish many media centers that are impossible before the Internet era. With Internet, Chinese pro-democracy groups have established a few influential media centers such as the TianWang in Sichuan, the YangZhi forum in Beijing, and the well-known Democracy and Human Rights Information Center in Hong Kong. In 1999, this Hong Kong center has released more than 700 reports on China’s democracy and human rights development [5]. It also has a collection of 1.8 million email addresses of Mainland Chinese to which the center can deliver reports. Both the TianWang and YangZhi were also very influential before the government closed them down.

Second, ICT also provides affordable tools for overseas dissident groups to conduct various kinds of media campaign like what did by Tunnel, Xiao Cankao, Da Cankao. The Tunnel has sent out a weekly online magazine to millions in China since 1996. Through emails, Xiao Cankao and Da Cankao also distributed back to China a lot of inside stories especially that of corruption cases. Other publications such as Democratic China magazine, Beijing Spring magazine and Press Freedom Guardian also used email to delivery their publications to Mainland China. With the help of this powerful tool, dissidents now can reach millions in China. And it provides to dissidents one more new way of protest – email protest letters campaign and possible hack attacks when necessary.

Thirdly, ICT helps softliners inside the regime and generates pressure on hardliners, which impacts the operation of China’s authoritarian regime and forces its opening up. For example, the Internet opinion has helped premier Zhu Rongqi to change his version about the Jiangxi school explosion that killed 34 children in March of this year. At the beginning, the China Press issued an official news release that claims the accident was caused by a madman. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji was almost forced to apologize for this explosion, after reports circulating on the Internet undermined the regime's attempt to deny that the school was being used to manufacture fireworks. Hardliners and these corrupted cadres cannot control the info and manipulate it complete to its advantage.

Internet reports have also exposed other issues that the regime has tried to hide, from an AIDS epidemic in Hunan Province to police torture and ecological disasters.

Fourthly, and importantly, ICT is used to empower opposition forces by connecting democratic activities inside and outside the country in a cost effective way; Internet can also be extremely helpful for mobilizing political participation. The pro-democracy groups have not used the Internet for any big political movement yet. But, the Internet has been used as an effective coordinating tool for social movements. For example, the Falun Gong once used the net to marshale thousands of protesters for a peaceful sit-in in front of the leadership compound in Beijing in April of 1999.

Fifth and importantly, the net provides a new way to form opinions on many important issues. It provides for liberal intellectuals to participate in debates via online forums and to become online opinion leaders. Besides the over 1000 online forums that liberal intellectuals are using, another important example is the ChineseNewsNet established by pro-democracy Chinese reporters in New York [6]. It has quickly become the most popular news site, and has plaid a great role in shaping opinions. Its sister company Mirror Books also has taken a leading role in publishing business for the worldwide Chinese. For example, it is the Mirror Books who published many controversial books including the Chinese language version of TianAnMen Papers that led others to re-publish the books and distribut them inside China.

Besides the above-mentioned significant impacts on democratization, ICT also has some indirect but possibly more important impacts on liberalization by spreading democratic values and empowering civil societies

Internet in China has experienced a phenomenal growth from about 100,000 users in late 1996 to 22.5 million users in January of 2001. 60.02% of all the web users are between 18 to 30 years old. 70% of them have college or higher education. In average, they spend 14 hours per week (2 hours per day) on the internet [7]. China now has 265,000 web sites, and over 1000 active online forums focusing on social issues with a roughly 20 percent increase per quarter.

Apparently, a virtual world has been formed that affects over 22 million highly educated young people. Through the Internet, these young people can directly observe and study democracies practiced in western countries. They can visit the US government sites, even communicate with foreigner politicians, or participate in a political discussion in some popular sites like CNN. They can immediately enjoy the freedom to expression by posting opinion in any one of the 1000 Chinese forums, enjoy the freedom to organize a virtual club, enjoy the freedom to religion by virtually participating in religious activities such as online bible study, enjoy the freedom to protest virtually through conducting email campaigns or even using hack attacks

They may establish a political party and recruit members online. But that will lead to be arrested inside China for now. However, a few political parties have been established

with their web sites hosted in USA. This option does exist. I anticipate the Internet will be a powerful tool for China's first opposition party to recruit members.

As there is a growing consensus among practitioners and scholars that a vibrant civil society is a key contributor to democracy, especially the use of the Internet by both civil societal organizations and the mass public has significant effects. Especially important are human rights and other advocacy groups that actively use the net to promote social change. In addition, community, charitable, educational and other groups with less directly political agendas can also enhance a nation's social capital and the formation and spread of democratic impulses. Hence, social groups' use of the Internet to produce and distribute pro-democracy information, coordinate actions and form alliances with domestic and international counterparts and other organizations, may contribute a lot to democracy building.

## **2, The On Going Virtual Battle in China**

The importance of ICT has been recognized by democracy builders, as well or even more by the Chinese government. The Chinese regime, whose legitimacy relies heavily on its ability to control what people think and what information they receive, fully understands the potential threat posed by this Internet. Therefore, a battle to control ICT and to manipulate it to its own advantage has been going on in China since 1997 when the net started to grow.

The Chinese government hates the internet's political impacts, but the Chinese government also understands the economic importance of ICT, for instance, through increased and value-added productivity, skill modernization and job creation. Therefore, it tries to walk a fine line between reaping the economic benefits of the technology and surrendering a measure of political control. In other words, the government is trying to regulate the Internet, but has no plan to completely kill the net.

The government has, therefore, developed a variety of mechanisms to control Internet content and use, including attempts to block access to independent websites, the passage of sweeping new regulations that criminalize "spreading false information" and "rumors" on the web or "organizing cults". The government used well-publicized arrests to intimidate web-users and thereby encourage self-censorship. They saturated the web with official propaganda, and trained cadres of cyber-police to man new Internet monitoring units in provincial capitals and major cities throughout the country.

The government even closed a few web sites, online forums and Internet café. The crackdown sometimes is quite severe. For example, the government has arrested and sentenced Lin Hai in Shanghai, who sent a list of e-mail addresses to a pro-democracy magazine, Huang Qi in Sichuan, who ran a human rights Web site, and recently a group of intellectuals in Beijing who ran an online forum.

The regime's efforts at control have been quite effective in certain degree, but have been at best only partially successful. Mainland-based content providers, which are subject to

regulation, remain more popular than foreign sites and pro-democracy sites, which the regime has tried to block. But easy access to encryption programs and proxy servers makes it possible to evade censorship and reach blocked sites, and the regime's enforcement of the regulations has been less than fully resolute, partly because economic growth would be hindered by tying up the Internet in a knot of rigid controls, and also importantly because the sheer volume of information on the net defies comprehensive monitoring. Most importantly, the cost is extremely low for pro-democracy groups to re-create a new web site when the old one got shouted down by the authority. Not like newspaper or radio station, re-start a web site is relatively inexpensive which makes it impossible for the government to maintain a total control.

The government's intension to control also has encountered resistance from the pro-democracy groups as well as private Internet companies? Pro-democracy groups often establish a mirror site in overseas so that they can continue the work and reserve the valuable data, in case the site gets shut down in side China. These groups also change email addresses and even domain names frequently, as emails are free and domain name cost is very low.

Due to the nature of ICT, the government will never be able to really win this virtual battle. At the same time, there are also side effects of the government's action to suppress. First, as this battle is still going on, and it actually provides another opportunity for pro-democracy forces to get more organized and better trained, especially for pro-democracy groups in exile. The biggest danger for pro-democracy activists is for them to become marginalized. The Internet provides a way for people in exile to continue their work and directly face the government and its people. The Internet brings dissidents back in their homeland at least virtually. Many of them do not feel isolated or alone anymore, after going into the virtual battle. Secondly, this battle itself is very meaningful as a political education tool as it clearly demonstrates to the young generation about how terrible the government is in covering up crimes and suppressing the hopefuls.

### **3, The Implications of the China Experience and a Few Suggestions**

The above discussion clearly shows ICT's help on democratization through damaging government's monopoly over information and ideas, through empowering opposition forces. But, the actual effects go far beyond these two. The virtual world created by the Internet provides an effective way for young people to have a first hand experience of freedom of expression and other political rights. The virtual world provides a new way to build democracy values and institutes. All these will not only help opening up authoritarian regimes, but also help consolidating democracies in the future. Besides this, the virtual world actually created a new battlefield between pro-democracy groups and the dictators. Just for this reason alone, enough effort should be made to advance the Internet. However, the Internet is still in its early development stage that its impacts on democracy are far beyond our imagination.

When providing assistance by international organizations to help promote democracy, effort should always focus on the most effective ones. As we demonstrated in previous

sections, the most effective ways of using ICT to promote democracy include the following four for pro-democracy groups: (a) e-mail campaign to break information monopoly, (2) posting articles to thousands of forums to shape opinions, (3) spread democracy values and empower civil society by making ICT available to all young adults and social groups, (4) using ICT to connect dissidents inside and outside the country, using ICT to conduct social movement that all will empower opposition groups. As more and more pro-democracy groups start using ICT, more and more effective practices will emerge in the future.

As noticed by many, however powerful it may be, the Internet is just a tool. How much success democracy builders can have depend more on people than on tools. But, good tools do make huge difference. Especially now, almost all the pro-democracy groups are using ICT in various ways. Therefore, a good assistance is needed to provide to these pro-democracy groups.

In the previous section, we have briefly described the virtual battle between pro-democracy groups and the dictators. In China, the Internet is used by pro-democracy groups as well as by the government. It is impossible for the government to gain a total control now. But there is also no guarantee that pro-democracy groups can win this virtual battle, as the government has controlled more and more Internet resource but the pro-democracy groups are losing technology advantages if any. A digital divide already exist between the rich and the poor. We hope a different kind of digital divide will not be in between dictators and democrats.

In general, the Internet does provide opportunities to speed up political liberalization. A virtual battle is going on now. Let us help the pro-democracy groups to win.

With the help of Internet, democracy may come to China sooner than ever.

Note:

[1] Rafal Rohozinski, "How the Internet Did Not Transform Russia," *Current History* Oct. 2000: 334-338; Kathleen Hartford, "Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics," *Current History* Sept. 2000: 255-262; Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (Winter 1999-2000): 1-25, [[http://www.ijclp.org/4\\_2000/pdf/ijclp\\_webdoc\\_1\\_4\\_2000.pdf](http://www.ijclp.org/4_2000/pdf/ijclp_webdoc_1_4_2000.pdf)] Garry Rodan, "The Internet and Political Control in Singapore," *Political Science Quarterly* 113.1 (Spring 1998): 63-89, [[http://64.33.36.250/cgi-bin/99\\_article.cgi?byear=1998&bmonth=spring&a=04free&format=view](http://64.33.36.250/cgi-bin/99_article.cgi?byear=1998&bmonth=spring&a=04free&format=view)]

[2] "Dictatorships in the Digital Age: Some Considerations on the Internet in China and Cuba" in *Information Impacts* magazine Oct 2000  
[http://www.cisp.org/imp/october\\_2000/10\\_00drake.htm](http://www.cisp.org/imp/october_2000/10_00drake.htm)

[3] Carl Gershman, “The Internet and Democracy Building – The NED Experience”  
Workshop on the Internet and Democracy-building, Wilton Park, UK April 27-28, 2001

[4] Han Minzhu (ed.) 1990 Cries for Democracy New Jersey: Princeton University Press

[5] Hong Kong Chinese Democracy Information Center <http://www.89-64.com/>

[6] [www.DuoWeiNews.com](http://www.DuoWeiNews.com)

[7] China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC Survey 2001.1  
<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/develst/e-index.shtml>

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