

The Development and the State Control of the Chinese Internet

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Commissioner June Teufel Dreyer, Commissioner William Reinsch, and Distinguished Commission members,

My name is XIAO Qiang. I am the Director of China Internet Project, of the Graduate School of Journalism of UC Berkeley. The Berkeley China Internet Project was founded in fall, 2003, with the mission to explore the impact of the digital communication technologies on China's transition and its emerging role in the global community. In the last two years, my research has been focused on state censorship in Chinese cyberspace and the creative use of interactive media to advance the world's understanding of China. It is an honor to be among my distinguished fellow panelists, in front of this important commission.

China is in the nascent stages of a momentous transition that will shape the world of the 21st century and beyond. The country's opening to the outside world, the rapid expansion of access to the Internet, and reforms in state-owned media demonstrate that there is a greater flow of information within China, and between China and the rest of the world than ever before. Over the past two decades, China's rapid economic growth allowed it to emerge as an economic and political power in the international community. China is now a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and will host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. With booming Internet use and an expanding high-tech sector, the government lauds the country's transformation into an "Information Society."

Despite this remarkable transformation, however, the country is still a one-party state, and its leaders are fearful that free speech combined with the free flow of information could destroy both their political legitimacy and control over society. Maintaining the power status quo is the central agenda of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The government views the Internet as vital to economic and technological development but is expending significant resources to maintain control over both Internet content and public access to that content. I am pleased to share with this commission some of my research and observations about the development and the state control of the Chinese Internet.

Internet Usage

Chinese Internet usage has continued to expand exponentially, rising from about 2000 people online in 1993 to over 100 million in the spring of 2005. According to Gallup's

latest nationwide poll of China, 12% of all Chinese aged 18 and older -- or more than 100 million people -- say they have used the Internet. The number of users is now second only to the number in the United States. Thirteen percent of Chinese households nationwide own at least one computer -- a proportion that rises to 47% in the country's 10 largest cities, and 66% in Beijing. More than 100,000 Internet cafes throughout China provide Internet access to individuals, especially youth, who do not own computers. Domestically produced websites number in the millions. 85% of Chinese Internet users are male, 40% are in the 21–25 age group, according to the latest Gallup survey. Cellular phones are rapidly becoming another important means of communication in China, and there are now more than 300 million mobile phone users in China, many of whom carry phones with wireless and short message services (SMS) capabilities.

Chinese government control over the Internet

Since 1995, the PRC government has been the main force promoting the expansion of the Internet and high technology in China, in order to improve the country's economic competitiveness as a "knowledge-based economy." Though they acknowledge that China needs the economic benefits the Internet brings, authorities also fear the political fallout from the free flow of information. Since the Internet first entered China, the government has used an effective multi-layered strategy to control Internet content and monitor online activities at every level of Internet service and content networks.

- **The Centralized Infrastructure for Controlling the Internet**

Unlike in the United States and most democratic countries, where the Internet has grown in a distributive, emerging fashion, development of the Internet in China was driven by the government, and its hardware infrastructure remains very centralized, making it easy to implement top-down control mechanisms. Internet users in China connect to the global World Wide Web through six interconnection networks, or gateways, which are tightly controlled by government agencies. Many private Internet Service providers (ISPs) exist, but they can only operate if they connect to the web through the six gateways. In effect, the Internet in China is really a nationwide Intranet, with limited and government-controlled access to the global Internet.

- **Rules and regulations regarding the Internet**

The first regulations covering online activities were passed in 1994, and since then, 37 laws and regulations have been implemented to govern the Internet.

Some of these laws are unremarkable, while others explicitly mandate state control of the Internet. Article 15 of the 'Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services' lists the content that is illegal on the Net:

1. information that goes against the basic principles set in the Constitution;

2. information that endangers national security, divulges state secrets, subverts the government, or undermines national unification;
3. information that is detrimental to the honor and interests of the state;
4. information that instigates ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, or that undermines national unity;
5. information that undermines the state's policy for religions, or that preaches evil cults or feudalistic and superstitious beliefs;
6. information that disseminates rumors, disturbs social order, or undermines social stability;
7. information that disseminates pornography and other salacious materials; that promotes gambling, violence, homicide, and terror; or that instigates the commission of crimes;
8. information that insults or slanders other people, or that infringes upon other people's legitimate rights and interests; and
9. other information prohibited by the law or administrative regulations.

These definitions vague and broad, and can easily be arbitrarily interpreted by state powers such as State Security and Public Security agencies. It also is explicitly stated in these laws and regulations that all netizens, including individuals, service providers, hosts of chat rooms or bulletin boards, or hosting companies, bear responsibility for all content that they access or make available online. Through these strategies of intimidation, the government has effectively legislated self-censorship in Chinese cyberspace.

- Establishing Internet Police Force

In addition to legal regulations, since 2000 China's police force has established Internet departments in more than 700 cities and provinces. As in many other countries around the world, these police handle all computer and network security related crimes, but in addition, the Chinese Net police also monitor websites and email for "heretical teachings or feudal superstitions" and information "harmful to the dignity or interests of the state". In last five years, international human rights organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists has documented dozens of imprisonment cases of people only publish information on the Internet.

Internet police also have access to software which enables them to detect "subversive" key words in emails and downloads as well as to trace messages back to the computers from which they were sent. Internet police can routinely deny access to Internet protocol (IP) addresses – the series of numbers which are behind the familiar "www" addresses.

- Technological filtering of Internet content

Perhaps the most internationally known component of government control is the "Great Firewall", which protects the six gateways connecting China to the global Internet. Its main function is to prevent surfers in China from accessing "undesirable" web content in the global cyberspace.

Research at the Berkman Center at Harvard University has found that blocked sites include overseas Chinese-language news websites, such as BBC Chinese, and most news sites originating in Taiwan and Hong Kong; and religious and human-rights websites such as Falun Gong and Amnesty International USA.

Content filtering is not only implemented at the “national gateway” level, but also throughout the public Internet access facilities in China. In 2003, the net police closed almost half of the country’s 200,000 Internet cafes, and installed surveillance and filtering software in the rest.

- Controlling of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs)

In addition to directly controlling Chinese Internet users access to the global World Wide Web, the Chinese government mandates that all ISPs and ICPs must bear responsibility for any information distributed through their site. Authorities use licensing regulations and financial penalties to punish any companies that fail to comply. ICPs and ISPs are required to keep personal data on subscribers (including account numbers, addresses or domain names of websites, and telephone numbers) for two months, and to pass it on to authorities upon request. When website operators discover a message containing forbidden content, they are required to send it on to the Ministry of Information Industry, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Bureau for the Protection of State Secrets.

As a direct consequence of these control policies, all ISPs and ICPs in China must police themselves in order to operate. For example, the most politically active spaces online are online forums like bulletin boards and chat rooms. These allow people to express themselves anonymously and therefore safely, and are already beginning to have a social impact. Because of the government regulations, all web hosting services must hire moderators in order to keep their sites’ content acceptable to the Internet police. In addition to human censors, all website hosting services have also installed keywords filtering software. Posts on politically sensitive topics, such as Falun Gong, human rights, democracy, and Taiwan independence are routinely filtered. A list recently obtained by the China Internet Project in Berkeley found that over 1000 words, including “dictatorship”, “truth”, and “riot police” are automatically banned in China’s online forums.

- Establishing Powerful Propaganda Presence online

This actually constitutes a critically important component of the Internet control strategy by the Chinese government, though it is less well-known to observers outside of China. In last seven years, Chinese government has put in enormous financial resources and allowed special privileges to set up and support government-sponsored websites, from national level to regional and provincial levels. About 10% of all sites in Chinese cyberspace are directly set up and run by the government. Over 150 mains news sites are

established by the central and local government directly, including China's top five websites: Renmin Ribao, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, China Daily, and the China Internet Information Center.

Because of the increasing influence of online forums, in addition to the technological filtering and human censorship, the government also adopted a more sophisticated propaganda approach to "guide opinions" in those forums. For example, in one of the most popular bulletin board sites, "Strong Country Forum," whenever there are large news events, the editors always invite "experts" and government officials to directly chat with netizens, and communicate the government point of view. They also designated propaganda agents to work undercover online, pretending to be ordinary netizens, in order to monitor Internet forums as well as "guide" online discussions.

Conclusion:

The government so far appears to think that the benefits of the Internet for promoting economic development outweigh the political risks. Authorities are also betting on the demography of Internet users. According to the latest Gallup survey, 86% of Chinese Internet users have college degrees. Typically, those social elites with a vested interest in status quo are more likely to adopt the Internet as part of a newfound consumer lifestyle rather than a tool for social and political changes.

Thus far, the Chinese government has managed to promote the development of the Internet for its economic benefits, while maintaining enough control over online information. While the Internet is promoting communication through greater access to information in the public domain, it is also clear that the new technologies alone is not sufficient to open up the Chinese political system. However, despite of all the state censorship measures I have described above, it is also undisputable that the Internet is expanding the freedom of information and expression in China. Although many of these changes are still incremental, they are nevertheless profound. In the long term, when the Internet penetration in Chinese society continue to grow, and in the time of more radical social, political change emerges in Chinese society, the Internet and other digital communication technologies such as mobile phones will definitely play a powerful role, hopefully to facilitate those changes towards the positive direction: a peaceful transition to a more open and democratic China.

