

# THE COMING CRASH OF THE MATRIX

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For many Internet users in China, official censorship and suppression has led to an avoidance of controversial topics and a focus on basic human appetites. All the same, innovative technologies providing access to forbidden materials are breeding a hunger for truth and knowledge that threatens the entire structure of official control.

You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed, and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I will show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.—Morpheus, Matrix

The Chinese government has no less control over the Internet than it does over more traditional content providers such as television and publishers, and has launched powerful Internet censorship technology in response to alternative information from outside China that seeks to dodge administrative control through Web sites, email and physical travel. As a result, very few organizations are capable of mass mailing to China, and mainland Chinese are only able to access censored Web sites if they have the knowledge, ability and access to employ software such as Freegate or Ultrasurf. The fact that three out of four major Chinese newspapers in the U.S. are directly or indirectly controlled by the Chinese government<sup>1</sup> offers an additional impediment for alternative sources of information to travel back into China via the Web or even by word of mouth.

In this way, the control and manipulation of information in China, through both technical and social strategies, bears a remarkable similarity to the society portrayed in the film, *The Matrix*.<sup>2</sup> Most of the characters in the film have their nervous systems hooked up to electrodes and live in an illusion created by a computer system called “the Matrix.” When given access to the real picture, the protagonists find it difficult to believe, and some characters even choose to return to the Matrix, finding reality too hard to accept. Delivering uncensored information into China faces similar challenges. Many people experience initial fear and shock, but the same forces that prevent people

from receiving uncensored information are leading a growing number of people to seek it out. Once people come into contact with reality, some return to the comforts of official distortion, but others decide never to return. As more and more Chinese break through the boundaries of information control, there are signs of cracks developing in the Matrix that may cause it to crumble altogether within a few years.

## VOICES FROM THE CHINESE MATRIX

In March 2002, Dynamic Internet Technology (DIT)<sup>3</sup> launched a proxy network called DynaWeb to serve Internet users in China. Despite the escalation of Internet blocking in China, DynaWeb has provided a stable circumvention service. In the past two years, DIT has tracked feedback from Chinese Internet users who use DynaWeb.

Typical feedback sometimes carries tones of nationalism and distrust towards overseas sources with comments such as: “You are anti-China.”

“How can China be this bad? You are lying.”

“There are many problems in China, but if we expose all the negative side, there will be turmoil.”

“Psychiatric patients said that he is Falungong and wants to kill people. How can you allow Falungong sites?”

Such comments demonstrate the impact of sustained efforts on the part of China’s Propaganda Department, invoking nationalistic rhetoric and regurgitating distorted information.

But as time goes by, DIT has also seen a growing trend of feedback indicating the need for more reliable and diverse sources of information in China, such as:

“Great place! I can see light that was impossible before.”

“I am shocked to see this information. Now, I finally learn the reality about June 4th and Falungong.”

“Only through your site, I actually learn what is China.”

“CCP is hopeless. I do not know how much more Chinese will suffer.”

Comparing these two extreme responses, one can see that they all come from people who care about China, but reflect very different sources of information. Control of information and fear instilled by the government can prevent people from reading “dangerous” information at the beginning, but as the

second set of responses show, once people have more access to uncensored information, they value and appreciate these alternatives.

A common sentiment of new users of DynaWeb is fear. The most frequently asked question is, "Is this safe?" Many Chinese Internet users are fearful of being persecuted by the Chinese government, which is notorious for detaining and arresting Internet users. Publishing articles calling for democracy or discussing other subjects deemed "subversive" carries a very real element of risk. Some first-time DynaWeb users even close out of the browser after they scan a few news headings, very likely worried that the Internet police may be looking over their shoulder and will arrest them for accessing forbidden material.

A poem from a DynaWeb reader expresses this fear:

"Being bullied by authorities for so long, being an everyday civilian is like being a thief.  
They do not need any reason to charge me, and nobody will dare to interfere with them."

This fear is built upon the experience of tens of millions of deaths over a period of 50 years through periodic man-made crises such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the June 4th Massacre and the more recent crackdowns against the Falungong spiritual movement and underground Christians. Memories, ideologies and practices have been internalized, legitimized and passed through generations. During the famine in the 1960s that resulted from the Great Leap Forward, people ate the bark off of trees to save themselves from starvation. Yet when Chairman Mao toured the countryside, the Chinese painted the trees brown to create an illusion of utopia. After the 1989 Democracy Movement, the government required citizens to write down the government's version of the story as their own understanding of what happened during the June 4th Crackdown. As a result of this continuing dissonance between lived history and the government's story, all Chinese understand that there are things the government really doesn't want you to know or do, and that even seeking reasons for the lies is a dangerous exercise in futility. Everybody realizes that the government-controlled media provide distorted information, but few people understand or dare to explore how far the lies go.

Long-term denial of trustworthy information has led many Chinese people to develop a cynicism or apathy toward controversial topics and to concentrate on practical realities. Available information on the habits of Chinese Netizens indicates a preoccupation with material relating to love and sex, video games and other forms of entertainment.

But even these more unadventurous users have shown a willingness to take risks online when life and death are at stake. On April 20, 2003, soon after Chinese leaders cautioned officials not to cover up SARS, DIT witnessed a 50 percent rise in traffic. After the outbreak was contained, traffic stayed high, and logs show that more than 95 percent of DynaWeb users were from mainland China. Ultra Reach Internet Corp., another company that provides circumvention service to Chinese, observed similar trends.<sup>4</sup>

## THE COMING CRASH OF THE MATRIX?

**Cracks in the Matrix:** In addition to SARS, the mass protests surrounding Hong Kong's Article 23 anti-subversion law and the March 2004 presidential elections in Taiwan also triggered surges of visits to DynaWeb. Such critical information related to individual freedom, which at times may also involve life-and-death issues, has encouraged people to act despite their fears and overcome the initial mental and technical barriers involved in seeking uncensored information. After comparing the reports of critical information offered by overseas media to those available in China and comparing both to observed reality, readers are beginning to rely less on domestic media and are developing trust in alternative information sources such as the Web sites of overseas media, dissident groups and human rights and democracy activists.

Overseas media, dissident groups and human rights groups provide timely reports about current events, insightful commentaries and historical accounts of human rights violations throughout the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. The delivery of such information through the Internet is causing more and more cracks to appear in the Matrix to which Chinese have been wired for decades.

DynaWeb has also delivered millions of electronic copies of *Zhuan Falun* (the teachings of the Falungong) and Zhang Liang's *The Tiananmen Papers* to Chinese citizens. These materials strike at the heart of the Chinese government's efforts to control information and convince the general public to accept an official version of events.

There have been interesting discussions in Chinese forums



An Internet café in Guangzhou. Photo: Reuters

regarding official Chinese media reports relating to the Iraq “torture-gate” scandal and the recent case of a Chinese woman assaulted at the Canadian border by an American Immigration official. In spite of the anti-U.S. propaganda in China’s government-controlled media, many Internet users have found good human rights lessons for China in these instances. Reactions from the media, government and legal system in the U.S. offer a sharp contrast to the responses allowed in China, where more severe human rights violations occur as a matter of routine but without recourse to redress.

In the past year, more people seem to be engaging in activist issues online in China, triggered by various episodes where human rights violations have occurred. This demonstrates that there is a base of activists growing in China, people who are willing to hammer at the cracks they see developing in the Matrix. Successful cases of activism encourage people who are still fearful of persecution but who long for change, and may well be a key explanation for the exponential growth pattern of DynaWeb.

**Destination of the Matrix—crash:** International media, governments, Chinese scholars, IT experts, democracy activists and human rights organizations have all speculated on China’s strategies to control information on the Internet and its responses to circumvention technologies. The Chinese government continues to firmly hold its bottom line regarding Falungong and the June 4th Crackdown and has not issued or permitted an independent report or discussion regarding these issues. But the government’s sustained unwillingness to compromise in these areas will only provoke a growing flow of related and uncensored information that may ultimately lead to the crash of the Matrix.

**Projecting the coming crash of the Matrix:** The first critical mass will be reached when anybody in China who wants to access uncensored information can find a friend to share it with him. It is estimated that this will require 300,000 to 500,000 people with regular access to external information sources.<sup>5</sup> The second critical mass will be triggered by e-activism or other forms of activism. Last year, Sina News received approximately one million page views from an article on the Sun Zhigang case.<sup>6</sup> We estimate this critical mass at a few million, and historical data suggests that this number will be reached within one or two years. When this critical mass is reached, the Matrix will not be able to resist another blatant lie like the suppression of the SARS breakout and will crash.

The Chinese government has deployed an immense amount of resources to extend its control of information to the Internet. But the growing tension between government censorship, the willingness of Chinese citizens to explore alternative resources, and the development of circumvention technology to access uncensored information will eventually cause the government’s control of information to implode.

1. Mei Duzhe, China Brief, Volume I, Issue 10, Nov. 21 2001, [http://www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=17&&issue\\_id=638](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=17&&issue_id=638).
2. *The Matrix*, directed by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 1999.
3. Dynamic Internet Technology [www.dit-inc.us/](http://www.dit-inc.us/).
4. Private communication with UltraReach Internet Corp.
5. Xiao Qiang, Analysis of Information blocking and anti-blocking in China (in Chinese), <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/4/4/19/n514449.htm>.
6. Haibo Lu etc., Roundtable Discussion: Public Opinion in Chinese cyberspace, <http://journalism.berkeley.edu/conf/chinadf/schedule.html>.