

A MATTER OF TRUST: THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHINA

BY BOBSON WONG

Everyone agrees that a free Internet can be a potent tool for social change. But as Bobson Wong points out, while the development of anti-censorship software is important, the attitudes of users and content providers also have to be reconfigured in order for the Internet to reach its full social potential.

Introduction

On June 4, 2003, the 12th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Senator John Kyl introduced the Global Internet Freedom Act into the U.S. Senate. Designed to promote freedom of expression on the Internet, the bill is aimed at authoritarian countries such as China, Burma, Syria, Cuba and Saudi Arabia. It would create an Office of Global Internet Freedom to identify the countries that block information and the technology they use, then develop and deploy technologies to circumvent Internet censorship around the world.

The Global Internet Freedom Act reflects a popular view among people in the United States that eliminating Internet censorship will liberate people in China and other authoritarian countries from the tyranny of their governments. The bill's sponsors believe that the Internet "stands to become the most powerful engine for democratization and the free exchange of ideas ever invented." Representative Chris Cox, one of the bill's sponsors, claims that the bill will bring "to so many millions of enslaved people around the globe...the tools to outwit the thought police."

The bill's supporters and other like-minded people believe that transforming the Internet into a tool for social change is primarily a technological problem requiring a technological solution. According to this view, the problem is that people in authoritarian regimes have limited access to objective information, such as material from many Western-based human rights and news organizations, which provide viewpoints that differ sharply from the official government view. The solution is to create tools that circumvent online censorship with the ultimate aim of empowering people to bring about social change in these countries. With 68 million people on line,



Photo: Reuters.

China has more Internet users than any other country except the United States, and for that reason is often cited as the key target for anti-censorship measures.

Improving the ability of people in China to access banned material online is certainly necessary and important, but there is no guarantee that Chinese users will want to take advantage of this privilege. In fact, a closer look at who uses the Internet in China suggests that simply "liberating" China's Internet from government censors may not lead to a dramatic change in popular attitudes. Turning the Internet into an effective tool for social change in China involves not only solving the

technological problem of reducing online censorship but also providing a balanced forum for communication that Chinese users can trust.

The State of Internet Censorship in China

Western researchers have documented in detail the multiple methods through which Internet activity is restricted in China. Regulations ban activity considered threatening by the government, including the use of the Internet to incite the overthrow of state power, topple the socialist system, destroy national unity, promote "cults" (interpreted to mean groups such as the Falungong spiritual movement) or support the independence of Taiwan or Tibet. Sophisticated filtering technology enables government officials to monitor international traffic and block many Chinese users from accessing banned material, including Western-based news, political and pornographic sites. A large number of paid and volunteer censors also monitor Web sites, chat rooms and bulletin boards, often removing objectionable content within minutes of its appearing online. A growing number of "cyberdissidents" — activists who use the Internet to promote democracy by publishing articles on Web sites or bulletin boards that criticize the government — have been detained, and several have been charged with and convicted of "subversion." Many Western observers have concluded that censors have erected a "Great Firewall" around China and are constantly battling for control of Internet content in a "cat and mouse" game.

However, work by Chinese researchers indicates that this censorship is neither as extreme nor as unpopular in China as many Westerners might think. Users routinely violate the harsh laws such as registration requirements with impunity. Many users also have enough technical skills to circumvent government censors, as demonstrated by the growing number of Chinese who use proxy servers to access banned Web sites under the radar of official filters and censors. According to Guo Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), China's Internet users are primarily well-educated men aged under 30 who live in cities. They go online not to discuss politics but to chat with friends, download music or play games. Chinese Internet users tend to trust domestic news providers more than foreign news sources. In fact, the majority of Chinese users believe that online information should be controlled.

Furthermore, contrary to popular belief in the U.S., Chinese users are seldom pro-Western freedom fighters seeking to overthrow the Communist government. While many Chinese users believe that the Internet gives them more freedom to criticize government policies, many of them also rely on the government for their families' prosperity. They are also strongly patriotic and distrustful of the United States, as shown by anti-American sentiment expressed on Chinese sites after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999, the collision between a U.S. reconnaissance plane and a Chinese fighter jet in 2001, and the recent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Chinese users have sometimes bombarded Web sites with anti-government messages, but rather than calling for the over-



Police raid an illegal Internet cafe in Guangzhou. Photo: Reuters.

throw of the one-party system, these messages more typically criticize excessive government force, corruption or incompetence. For example, when users discovered in September 2002 that the Google search engine — one of the most popular sites in China — was being blocked, users posted millions of messages on Chinese sites expressing outrage over this hindrance to their Web surfing experience. During the official information blackout in the early stages of this year's SARS crisis, rumors and information about the disease circulated rapidly through e-mail, online chat rooms and short message text (SMS) telephone networks. But these were exceptions; Chinese users generally support the government, criticizing it only when it takes actions that affect them directly.

That is why, even if official censorship efforts ended tomorrow, Chinese Internet users would probably not flock to the Amnesty International or White House Web sites. Users are also unlikely to care about the issues that Western-based human rights organizations focus on when discussing China's Internet, such as the arrest of "cyberdissidents" for using the Internet to promote democracy. Users expressed far more outrage about the detention of Beijing Normal University student Liu Di last year than over the arrest of any pro-democracy activist. Liu had criticized the closure of Internet cafes in China and expressed sympathy for jailed Webmaster Huang Qi, and many of her sympathizers said she was not a pro-democracy dissident but simply a young student who posted sarcastic or critical messages without thinking of the consequences.

Building Trust Over the Internet

If Chinese users are generally apathetic about political issues, how can the Internet be used for social change?

Chinese users have demonstrated their need for alternative sources of information by turning to these sources when they cannot get what they want from government-approved sources. The need for other sources of information is particularly pressing because most of the people providing these alternatives lack sufficient resources to reach large numbers of people effectively. For example, traffic to the Radio Free Asia Web site more than doubled during the SARS epidemic before Chinese censors blocked access. SafeWeb recorded millions of hits from within China for its free service that enabled people to surf the Web anonymously without having to download any additional software, but the company finally terminated the service due to lack of resources. Volunteer programmers, usually motivated by an altruistic desire to promote freedom of expression, have created free software tools such as Peekabooby that enable users to circumvent Internet censorship. But these programmers usually lack the time or money to make their products more accessible to average users, with the result that most of these tools are hard to find and even harder to use.

Meanwhile, governments, corporations and Internet service providers around the world have allotted vast resources to improving Internet filtering and monitoring tools. Internet security is a rapidly growing and highly profitable field, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, almost nobody has devoted comparable resources to improving freedom of expression. Only someone with the resources and resolve of the U.S. government will be able to create user-friendly tools for circumventing censorship, disseminate them to a widespread audience and adjust and maintain them over an extended period of time. That is why efforts such as the Global Internet Freedom Act have a real potential for improving the ability of people in totalitarian countries to access information via the Internet.

But this improved access must be combined with efforts to change Chinese attitudes toward external sources of information. Simply making more information available to users will have little impact on patriotic young Chinese who distrust the United States and care little about the issues of greatest concern to Western activists. Chinese users need a balanced, uncensored online discussion forum that they can trust and where they can express themselves on topics that they care about, as they tried to do with SARS-related postings that were quickly deleted from Chinese bulletin boards. To be effective, such a forum must allow Chinese users to discuss topics freely, even if they criticize the U.S. government or U.S.-based human rights organizations. Western organizations could also use such a forum to present alternative viewpoints, but they must overcome the distrust of many Chinese who see them as extensions of the U.S. government. It remains to be seen whether the Office of Global Internet Freedom will be able to provide an objective discussion forum trusted by Chinese users. As part of the International Broadcasting Bureau, which provides support for Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, the Office of Global Internet Freedom will run the risk of being seen as controlled by the U.S. government.

NGOs can play a positive role in fostering an environment in which Chinese users are able and willing to share and receive information. If a balanced, uncensored online forum is created, NGOs can use it to provide reliable information not provided by the Chinese government on issues of concern to people in China, such as the impact of the World Trade Organization on China, government corruption and economic modernization. Such issues include topics related to rights but are not the usual topics of focus for human rights NGOs. NGOs should continue to monitor and publicize abuses in China, since such information is unlikely to come from government-approved sources, but they can improve trust and balance the information they present by also recognizing positive changes in China's rights record, particularly in the years since Deng Xiaoping's modernization efforts. NGOs should be aware that excessive criticism of the government, no matter how egregious its human rights abuses, will only increase distrust and reduce the potential for dialogue. In addition, if the Global Internet Freedom Act becomes law, NGOs should monitor the Office of Global Internet Freedom to ensure that it allows expression of a wide diversity of views and does not degenerate into a propaganda tool for the U.S. government.

Further research is required to determine whether or not an objective, uncensored online discussion forum could actually succeed, what form such a forum should take, and what its technical requirements would be. In addition, someone must devise a way to circumvent inevitable censorship by the Chinese government, or must persuade government censors that allowing free access to the information would be in China's best interests. The first option involves solving difficult technological problems that must be repeated with each technological breakthrough on the censorship end. The second involves overcoming major diplomatic hurdles and removing barriers of distrust, but would prove more effective in the long run. In the end, more must be done to address the non-technological barriers to freedom of expression in China and to increase trust between people in China and the West. Only then will the Internet become an effective tool for social change.