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Publication pending in Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, eds., *The Political Promise of Blogging* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press)

**Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China
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Even in the United States, there is much debate as to whether weblogs - which enable anybody with an Internet connection to create and disseminate information and opinion - will or will not ultimately create a wider discourse amongst citizens that may in turn make our democracy more accountable. Yet at the same time, there is a common popular assumption in the United States that the Internet - and with it weblogs and other forms of online, participatory media - is ultimately a force for democratization and freer society. This belief was reflected in testimony by representatives of Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! and Cisco at hearings held before the House of Representatives in February 2006.¹ In May 2005, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote an Op-Ed titled "Death by a Thousand Blogs," in which he concludes: "it's the Chinese leadership itself that is digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband."²

While such conclusions are frequently echoed in the news media, scholarship and technical research on the Internet and politics in China takes a more sober view. Even as it has supported the development of the Internet as a tool for business, entertainment, education, and information exchange, the Chinese government has been much more successful than most people ever imagined at controlling the information accessed and conversations conducted by the vast majority of Chinese Internet users. As the OpenNet Initiative concluded in its 2004-05 study of Chinese Internet censorship: "China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world. The implications of this distorted on-line information environment for China's users are profound, and disturbing."³ A ten-fold explosion in the number of Chinese weblogs in 2005 posed a new challenge to the regime. However this challenge, while difficult, has been manageable - at least for the short and perhaps even the medium term. By examining the evolution of blogs in China through early 2006, this chapter will show that - as with the Internet more generally - the Chinese regime has managed the advent of online participatory media surprisingly well, with the substantial help and cooperation of foreign and domestic business.

It is important to note however that the Internet generally and blogs more specifically can potentially be a *medium* and *tool* for political change in China, and there are some indications that this is already starting to be the case.⁴ Veteran dissident Liu Xiaobo believes that the Internet has transformed his ability to disseminate information as well as to organize petition drives. "The Internet is God's present to China" he writes. "It provided the best tool for the Chinese people in their project to cast off slavery and strive for freedom."⁵ The problem is that much popular discussion of the Internet and politics in China mixes up what is a medium and tool, and what is a cause. The Internet in and of

itself will not be a *cause* of political change in China: the causes will be much broader social, economic and political. Given the right circumstances, online citizens' media such as blogs may indeed facilitate, amplify, and accelerate these causes. But blogs will not *be* the cause. People deciding to take action in large numbers, organized by charismatic and capable leaders, will be the cause.

The Internet and China's Open Door

Comparative study of the relationship between Internet and government around the world has led scholars like Daniel Drezner to conclude that the Internet has different political implications for different political systems. Rather than serve as an agent of democratic change worldwide, the Internet instead "merely reinforces the pre-existing dynamics between states and non-state actors" with one substantial exception: "the large group of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states that wish to exploit the economic possibilities of the information society."⁶ While China certainly fits into this category, its leaders are well aware of the risky path they have chosen. They are determined to prevent the Internet from serving as a tool for "color revolution" in the way that online media and communication tools empowered activists in Ukraine and Lebanon.⁷ To this end, in 2005 the Chinese government updated its regulations controlling online news and information, and has aggressively sought to stop the spread of online discussions about recent local government crackdowns against farmer protests in the Chinese countryside.⁸

It is important to understand that while the Internet may be new, the challenge it poses to the Chinese leadership is not. Balancing openness with control has in fact been the central challenge to the Chinese Communist Party since Deng Xiaoping began his policy of "reform and opening up" in 1979: On the one hand he opened China's doors to foreign trade and investment, allowing Chinese to study in the West for the first time since the Communist Revolution, while kick-starting a process of gradual economic reforms. On the other hand, Deng sought to control this whole process through economic incentives combined with police coercion and even occasional military force. This approach has so far ensured that the rise of a new commercial class. Public exposure to foreign ideas did not lead to the rise of an alternative political power base capable of overthrowing the Chinese Communist Party. One of Deng's favorite sayings in the early 1980's was: "If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in." The regime has thus far been successful at fly-swatting: not all of the "flies" have been swatted, but enough problems have been managed to keep the regime in power. The fact that the lives of most urban residents have substantially improved since reforms began 25 years ago has of course been another key factor in the balance. And while peasants may riot in the countryside against corruption and economic inequality, the regime has so far been effective at preventing leaders of local movements with specific, localized demands from linking up to form any kind of cohesive national movement with larger political goals.

When the Internet arrived in China in 1994, the Chinese leadership recognized it had no choice but to open this window too - for the sake of China's global economic competitiveness as well as the widely shared national aspiration to become one of the

world's most technologically advanced nations. A new set of "fly-swatters" came out: Internet regulations and a system for monitoring and control at multiple levels. As with the "reform and opening" policy generally, flies still get in, but the economic and social benefits gained through this newly opened door are seen to outweigh not only the costs of swatting flies - but also the damage to regime credibility created by the "flies" that do get through. The Internet is yet another plane on which the Communist Party wages its ideological battles against foreign "flies" - attempts via the open door to subvert the regime's power and legitimacy. A recent *People's Daily* editorial encapsulates this view:

As long as we use more ways of properly looking at the Internet, we can make use of the best parts, we go for the good and stay away from the bad and we use it for our purposes, then we can turn it around on them. Just as we can defeat the well-armed American military in the Korean war of yesteryear, we won't be defeated in this huge Internet war by the various intranational and international reactionary ideological trends in the various areas.⁹

The Chinese government has other factors than iron determination, purple prose and a well-oiled propaganda machine working in its favor. According to a 2005 study on urban Chinese Internet use funded by the Markle Foundation and conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), most Chinese Internet users seek out entertainment online, not hard news or serious political discussion. As the study's executive summary puts it: "rather than being an information highway, the Internet in China is more like an entertainment highway."¹⁰ The Chinese government is also pursuing a nationwide e-government strategy, including online mechanisms for citizen feedback, complaints and suggestions, as part of a strategy that views the Internet as a tool to actually bolster the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.¹¹ This is combined with the fact that there is enough room allowed in Chinese cyberspace for conversation about a sufficiently wide range of subjects that forums, chatrooms and blogs do to a certain extent serve as a "safety valve" for people to let off steam and air specific gripes about government corruption or incompetence, thus diminishing people's perceived need to go into the streets in order to be heard.

On the other hand, nationalistic diatribes and rants against Japan and the United States are generally allowed to rage unchecked, as long as they do not lead to offline protest activity that might spin out of control.¹² China's system of Internet censorship, while not impenetrable, is sophisticated and effective enough that the picture of the world as seen by the average Chinese Internet user is heavily skewed in the regime's favor. Furthermore, as China's pool of Internet users increases, it appears that a decreasing percentage have been using proxy servers - a technique to circumvent Internet censorship. According to a 2000 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) survey of Internet use in five Chinese cities, 10 percent of users surveyed admitted to regularly using, and 25 percent to occasionally using, proxy servers to circumvent censorship.¹³ A 2005 CASS Internet user survey, asking the same question, received the following response: "never": 71.2 percent; "seldom": 19.7 percent; "sometimes": 5.9 percent; "often": 2.5 percent; "frequently": 0.6 percent.¹⁴

Anecdotal evidence further suggests that while many people - especially university students - might be aware of proxy servers and know how to use them, the percentage of

people who use proxy servers daily to access blocked sites is relatively small. As the student blogger "Undersound" wrote in response to questions about frequency of proxy server use in China posed to Chinese bloggers at *Global Voices Online*:

1. The first question I would prefer a percentage of 5%. Most of my classmates and friends just don't need to resort to proxy. They just view the major websites in China, which would comply with government and have no risk of shut down.
2. It is difficult to view blocked site as for the low speed and inconvenience. So rarely would we use those proxy unless the information is important.
3. Blocked sites are usually consisting of those types: blogs, TaiWan media, oversea community criticizing Chinese policy. Chinese internet users tend to focus on some entertainment like online game and chat, rather than some serious subject. So generally those blocked sites had a limited impact. But for someone who are seeking those information it is very annoying. [sic]¹⁵

On the other hand, it is easy to access information showing the Chinese government in a positive light, or at least being responsive to certain problems the regime admits to having. Critical information exists online, but it is kept at the level of specific complaints and relatively tame localized gripes. Only the most determined and tech-savvy Internet users will succeed in accessing web pages about Chinese authorities' human rights abuses, or information relating to the Taiwan secession movement. On the other hand, information about Japanese atrocities, alleged US "secret prisons" and abuses at Abu Ghraib, and belligerent vitriol supporting attacks on Taiwan if it declares independence, are all easily found in Chinese cyberspace. Thanks in part to this filtered view of the world, nationalism and xenophobia have found fertile breeding ground on the Chinese Internet, while a pro-democracy movement has not.¹⁶ This situation is reinforced by recent survey results - surprising to many Westerners - showing that most urban Chinese Internet users actually trust domestic sources of news and information more than they trust the information found on foreign news websites.¹⁷

Offline, no viable alternative to the current leadership has emerged or been allowed to emerge. China has no Yushenko or Walesa or Havel for people to rally around, and no such person has been allowed to emerge online either. Chinese public opinion remains divided and compartmentalized: while rural farmers are increasingly disgruntled, recent surveys indicate that most urban elites generally feel that they have gained much more control over their lives than they had two decades ago, and are unwilling to sacrifice their economic gains of the past 25 years in exchange for the chaos and uncertain future that a collapse of the CCP and its governing structures would bring.¹⁸

One could even argue that skilful management of the Internet might buy the Chinese Communist Party another several decades in power. At the same time, the Internet may also be enabling the development of "civil society" and public discourse over policy that could well make a gradual evolution toward democracy more likely over the long run. Singapore-based Internet scholar Randolph Kluver argues that it is necessary to "put the impetus for change within China's own cultural and political realities." Rather than argue that the Internet will democratize China - which is an ideologically charged debate, impossible to prove, and depends on how one defines "democracy" in the first place -

Kliver chooses to advance the "less radical" and "less disruptive" argument that "new forms of civic discourse are emerging."¹⁹

Some Chinese bloggers fear that the excessive focus by Western media on blogs as a vehicle for political dissent may be counterproductive, making the authorities more suspicious of the emergent new forms of online civic discourse than they might otherwise be. There is indeed substantial evidence that blogs have emerged as a powerful force in creating new forms of civic discourse online. There is no evidence that blogs simply by virtue of their existence will foster rapid or dramatic political change. The role of weblogs in Chinese political change will depend not only how people choose to use them but also to what extent the Chinese government succeeds in controlling the use of weblogs for political dissent.

Brief History of Chinese Blogging, 2002 to early 2006

Despite censorship and new government measures to control what bloggers can and cannot write, the Chinese blogosphere is thriving. This situation may appear counter-intuitive to the Western observer, but in the Chinese context it makes sense as part of a larger process of social, political and economic bargaining between government and population that has been going on in all aspects of Chinese life since reform and opening began.²⁰ The Chinese government has arrived at an accommodation with businesses providing blogging software and hosting services to Chinese users: blog-hosting services are allowed to operate as long as they build censorship into their software tools and business processes. The Chinese bloggers have no choice but to accept these conditions in order to blog and actually have an audience inside the PRC. Similar accommodations are commonplace throughout China's news, information and entertainment industries, and thus the companies involved have not pushed back against censorship requirements.

While there are no truly reliable numbers on the exact size of the Chinese blogosphere, there is no question that 2005 was China's Year of the Blog. In January 2005, estimates hovered around half a million Chinese blogs; by July, estimates by some Chinese blog-hosting companies put the number as high as 5 million.²¹ By December, the Chinese blog search engine Baidu was claiming numbers as high as 36.82 million, a number which several bloggers have challenged as improbable.²² (One reason for discrepancies in counting is that search engines use a very different method in measuring web pages, making it more likely that spam blogs or "splogs" as well as abandoned blogs are included in the total count, as Ethan Zuckerman points out in the previous chapter.²³) Fang Xingdong, CEO of Bokee.com, China's largest domestic blog-hosting company, claimed in December to be hosting 3.2 million blogs, and by January 2006 Microsoft had counted 3.3 million Chinese language blogs on its MSN Spaces blogging platform.²⁴ Add to that several million more blogs hosted on hundreds of other Chinese blog-hosting platforms (according to a survey by the Chinese search engine Baidu, by the end of 2005 there were 658 blog service providers (BSPs), with 330 of those hosting more than one thousand register users.²⁵ Thus one may safely estimate that the number of active Chinese blogs by the end of 2005 was over 10 million.

Interestingly, by the end of 2005, the world weblog total was estimated at around 27 million blogs by weblog-tracking service Technorati.²⁶ As Ethan Zuckerman points out in the chapter prior to this one, it is likely that Chinese blogs are heavily undercounted by global blog-tracking services like Technorati and Blogpulse because Chinese blog-hosting services have not set up their blog software to "ping" the global "pingservers" each time a new blog post is published, as do most U.S. blog hosting services.²⁷ Be that as it may, according to David Sifry, CEO of the weblog-tracking service Technorati, the global blogosphere is not only doubling every five months, but "some of the significant increases" in 2005 were "due to a proliferation of Chinese-speaking weblogs."²⁸ According to Technorati, 60-70 percent of blogs on Microsoft's MSN Spaces service are in Chinese.²⁹ In an analysis of worldwide blog-posting activity over the course of a single 24 hour period, Matthew Hurst of Intelliseek Inc./Blogpulse found Chinese users to be three times more active on MSN Spaces than users from any other country (with U.S. users in second place).³⁰

By contrast, Hurst found that Chinese usage doesn't even make the top 20 on Blogspot.³¹ This is not surprising given that Blogspot has been blocked to most Internet users in China for the better part of 2005. Most other commonly used foreign-based blog-hosting services such as Typepad, Blogsome, Blog-City, plus at least half-dozen others, have been blocked on and off by the Chinese filtering apparatus since the middle of 2005.³²

As in most countries, blogging tools first began to be used in China by the early-adopting technology community. In 2002 web entrepreneur Isaac Mao teamed up with a Chinese schoolteacher who he discovered on Blogger.com, writing one of the earliest Chinese blogs. The two of them founded CNblog.org, which quickly became the hub of a community of Chinese blog and social software enthusiasts who developed the first Chinese language blogging tools, promoting them among their friends and colleagues.³³ Meanwhile, in mid-2002 journalist and web entrepreneur Fang Xingdong set up China's first blog-hosting service, Blogchina, (now Bokee, China's number 1 domestically-run blog hosting service, and the world's second-largest Chinese-language blog hosting service after MSN Spaces). Fang is credited with having coined the most widely-used Chinese term for blog, "bo ke." Interestingly, Fang first became known in China for posting essays in the Internet denouncing Microsoft as a threat to Chinese national security - essays which were quickly taken down from the chatrooms. When Fang launched Blogchina, he found himself spending hours trying to convince Chinese officials that blogging would not be a threat to the regime. "At the time, they thought, 'If everyone can publish, wouldn't we lose control?' " Fang told the *Washington Post* in an interview. "But I argued that a blog is like a person's home, and very few people would put something inappropriate in their home."³⁴

Yet it took a different kind of person to popularize blogging more widely in China. While in the U.S., many people associate the word "blogger" with political enthusiasts writing diatribes at home in their pajamas, in China most people first associated the Chinese word for "blog" with "sex diary." This is thanks to China's most famous blogger, Mu Zi Mei, who in 2003 rose to national notoriety with her blog containing daily updates about

her extremely active and varied sex life.³⁵ Her blog is credited with having driven thousands of readers - and eventually new bloggers - to her blog hosting provider, Blogchina.³⁶ The fact that Muzimei's sex diary cost her her job at a Guangzhou magazine, and the fact that a book compilation of her entries was recalled from bookstores quickly after it hit the shelves, has done nothing to dampen her popularity, thanks to the Internet.³⁷ China's political climate would have made it impossible for a dissident political thought leader to emerge in this manner, but the fact that pop cultural icons can emerge through blogs, completely outside of the government approved cultural structures, is considered new and revolutionary in itself. In the past, editors, station directors, and publishers acted as cultural "gatekeepers," deciding who could and couldn't become known through publication, TV and film appearances, and musical performances.³⁸ The Internet has crashed the cultural gates. Now those gatekeepers can be circumvented, and new online stars are emerging whether the government likes it or not.³⁹ The Communist Party propaganda department has indeed lost control over China's culture. But in the realm of politics, the gates and walls are constantly being rebuilt, upgraded, and reinforced.

Over time, Bloggers also began to break news stories, showing their potential as a vehicle for alternative journalism. Wang Jianshuo, a Shanghai-based engineer working for Microsoft who maintained blogs both in English and Chinese, became widely known for his daily posts describing events in Shanghai during the SARS outbreak of 2003.⁴⁰ In 2004, a Beijing based blogger who posts pseudonymously to a blog called "24 Hours online" broke the story of a murder with eye-witness accounts and pictures. The story was widely picked up by Beijing newspapers, using the blogger as a source and republishing his photographs.⁴¹

It is important to note, however, that at least through late 2005, while blogs had grown tremendously in popularity and impact they were still overshadowed in influence and popularity by forums and bulletin boards, known as BBS. According to the CASS-Markle Chinese Internet usage study, by late 2005 44.8% of users surveyed used BBS, while only 29.5% used blogs.⁴² A blog is structured to have a distinctive author or small group of authors with distinct identities. While a blog author can write anonymously online, remaining truly untraceable if authorities are determined enough to track down the author requires a much more technological savvy and effort.⁴³ The free-for-all structure of the BBS, on the other hand, makes it possible for people wanting to speak freely online to hide in the large crowd of fake user-names and cloak their anonymity more successfully. While the companies or academic institutions hosting BBS services are expected to censor and monitor content posted in their forums, the sheer volume of postings on large sites means that by avoiding sensitive "keywords" that would get caught by the automated filtering software, people are often successful at posting politically sensitive information and opinion for hours and sometimes even days before it is discovered and taken down. For this reason, frustrated journalists have generally turned to BBS websites as the place to post newspaper stories and even photographs that are too politically sensitive to get past their editors. The BBS are also the place where politically-minded people of all professions have tended to go for political debates and discussions.⁴⁴ Thus, not surprisingly, in 2004, the BBS became the target of a government crackdown that

deepened throughout 2005. The first casualty was a popular BBS known as "SMTH," hosted at Tsinghua University (China's equivalent of MIT). In the fall of 2004, people who were not currently students at the university were blocked from posting. This, combined with new government regulations requiring BBS users to register their real names with the forum hosts in order to participate, effectively "killed" the SMTH community, since most users were posting anonymously from outside the university. Similar crackdowns were replicated on university BBS across China. Many BBS users needing a new home for their online conversations turned to blogs. Thus in late 2004 nascent blog hosting companies such as Blogbus and Blogchina (which later became Bokee) reported a sharp increase in new user registrations. Blogbus founder Isaac Mao said he believed the BBS crackdown to be a significant factor behind the 2005 blog explosion.⁴⁵

In April 2005 Chinese public outrage flared up over the historical revisionism in some Japanese textbooks that whitewashed Japanese atrocities in China during World War II. Thousands of young people, initially inflamed by Chinese patriotic state media rhetoric, hit the streets to express their outrage against Japan, and demanding that Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council must be stopped. Spontaneous gatherings were quickly organized thanks to Internet communications - short message services (SMS), BBS and nationalistic online forums with names like "Strong Nation Forum" which happens to be hosted by the state-run *People's Daily*, and anti-Japanese websites like Japanpig.com.⁴⁶ Ultimately the authorities brought a halt to the protests, spooked by their bottom-up spontaneous nature and worried that if students felt free to rage in the streets against Japan, they might eventually become emboldened to include grievances against their own government.⁴⁷ Blogs also played a role in the protests, although it appears that the web forums, BBS and SMS networks played a larger role - and that the primary role of blogs at that time was more related to facilitating discussion than organizing action. Chinese Internet expert Xiao Qiang believes that they also provided a space for people to question the herd mentality of many demonstrators:

Despite the silence of the official media in reporting the anti-Japan demonstrations, many online bulletin boards and Web blogs have engaged in lively debate about Sino-Japan relations, Chinese nationalism, and the goals and impact of the demonstrators. Many articles also criticized the crude form of nationalism seen in the protests and questioned the motives of the government's propaganda in giving anti-Japanese sentiment some political space.

By providing space for a pluralistic debate on such a heated topic, the Internet allows rational voices to be heard, and may ultimately help aid the development of civil society.⁴⁸

The fact that some bloggers were questioning people's faith in the government's nationalistic, anti-Japanese propaganda could not have been terribly comforting to authorities.

By late Spring of 2005, the Chinese blogosphere had grown sufficiently that new regulations aimed at controlling blogs were deemed necessary by the authorities. Bloggers and anybody else hosting what was termed a "non-commercial website" were

given a deadline of June 30th, 2005 to register their identities and domain names and obtain a registration number which must be displayed on their site.⁴⁹ The implication being that, if the blogger then posted content deemed unacceptable by authorities, that license could be revoked and the blogger's web host could be asked to take down his or her site. The consequences for not registering theoretically included arrest, although until now no such arrest has been reported, while many unregistered blogs have been taken down.⁵⁰

The regulations did not specify many details of implementation, but after a fair amount of confusion it eventually became clear that people whose blogs were hosted by commercial blog hosting companies like Blogbus, Bokee, DoNews, Sina, and a dozen or so others, including Microsoft's "MSN Spaces" weblog service, were exempt from the registration requirement.⁵¹ Why? Because just like the host organizations for BBS and web forums, the companies running the blog hosting services were held responsible by the government for all content appearing on their users' blogs. Thus they agreed to monitor and censor the blogs appearing on their services, with the understanding that there would be consequences (fines, revocation of business license, etc.) for failing to adequately "manage" their users.⁵² These blog-hosting services are also expected to hand over user information in specific cases that authorities might take a particular interest in. Such practices are all in accordance with the "Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry" rolled out in March 2002, which - despite being voluntary in theory - all Internet content-hosting and portal sites are expected to sign. This expectation extends to foreign companies as well, and Yahoo! was reported to be one of the earliest foreign signatories.⁵³

As the new blog-control regime was being implemented, in September 2005 the Chinese government unleashed a second, broader set of regulations targeting all online news and information sites.⁵⁴ According to the regulations governing any "Internet News Information Service," websites are forbidden from posting content deemed to be "violating the basic principles as they are confirmed in the Constitution" or "jeopardizing the security of the nation, divulging state secrets, subverting the national regime or jeopardizing the integrity of the nation's unity." (While blogs are not named, the regulations were widely interpreted afterwards by officials to include blog hosting services as well as BBS.) Such websites purveying news and information are also forbidden from "inciting illegal assemblies, associations, marches, demonstrations, or gatherings that disturb social order" or "conducting activities in the name of an illegal civil organization" and "any other content prohibited by law or rules."⁵⁵ Authorities are believed to be particularly concerned about the spread of information that could lead to political organizing.

Thus, speech that might lead to action - or to building connections between previously unconnected groups who are disgruntled about local governance issues - is a priority as far as resources devoted to policing and censorship are concerned.⁵⁶ Without a doubt, the space for discourse on a wide range of social, economic, environmental and cultural subjects has widened dramatically thanks to the BBS and blogs. But political speech,

especially that which might lead to action, remains the prime target for aggressive censorship.

Delegating Censorship to Private Business

How can the Chinese government possibly police millions of weblogs? That would be too costly to do directly and it doesn't try. Rather the government has outsourced the censorship and policing of most Chinese weblogs to the blog-hosting businesses. These businesses - including at least one U.S. company - have in turn integrated censorship into their business processes in order to remain in the good graces of the authorities.

According to executives of blog-hosting companies, lists of forbidden words are maintained, updated and shared by service providers, who then plug these keywords into their monitoring and/or filtering software.⁵⁷ In February 2006 the *Washington Post* obtained one such list from one of the blog-hosting companies. Journalist Philip Pan observed: "Of 236 items on the list, 18 were obscenities. The rest were related to politics or current affairs."⁵⁸ Microsoft's MSN Spaces Chinese-language blog-hosting service has also been complying with this system since its launch in the summer of 2005, and maintains a similar bad-word list. In exchange the Chinese government agrees not to filter MSN blogs at the Internet Service Provider level, as is done with other popular international blog services like Blogger.com.⁵⁹ The blog-hosting companies are left to their own devices in figuring out how best to monitor and censor user content to the government's satisfaction. (MSN Spaces is the only foreign blog-hosting service that complies with this system to date.) Here is how Pan describes how Chinese blogs are censored by hosting companies:

Most words on the list can be posted on Chinese Web sites, but their presence triggers software that quietly alerts editors to examine the messages that contain them and possibly delete them. In tests, postings that included long sections of the list were allowed to remain on several sites, but quickly removed from others. One site also blocked the computer used to conduct the tests from posting anything else.

In addition, on most sites, at least some of the sensitive phrases cannot be posted. Depending on the site, filters replace the offending words with asterisks or block the entire message.⁶⁰

In testing four different Chinese language blog hosting services run by Chinese companies at around the same time, my results were consistent with the *Post's* findings. Companies employ a variety of different approaches to control user content:

Bokee: I created four test blogs on Bokee, China's largest domestic blog-hosting site with 3.2 million bloggers at the end of 2005.⁶¹ Two of the test blogs contained politically sensitive content and two included only innocuous content about love relationships and cute dogs. Of the two politically sensitive blogs, one containing exclusively posts about the banned Falun Gong religious movement was taken down within 24 hours. (The words "falun gong" is arguably the most politically sensitive phrase on the Chinese Internet - members of the movement are very active online and used the Internet extensively in

organizing nationwide protests in 1999-2000.⁶²) Another blog with mixed content, with posts ranging from Falun Gong to Tibet Independence to the recent Dongzhou massacre of peasant farmers by police, remained accessible to Internet users inside and outside of China until one week after its creation. This result would appear to indicate that Bokee was monitoring its content manually and then censoring accordingly, with some content coming to the attention of company censors more quickly than others.⁶³

Sina.com: This blog-hosting service run by one of China's largest and most well-established web portals allowed me to post an entry about Falun Gong. However after about an hour or so, the post disappeared from the blog. As of this writing, the rest of the content, including a post about Tibetan independence and the Dongzhou village crackdown, has remained accessible both inside and outside of China.⁶⁴

Blogcn: This popular blog hosting portal also uses an automated censorship system. My attempt to post an entry about Falun Gong was greeted with the following error message: "1. The content you have submitted contains sensitive terms; 2. For the sake of Blogcn's healthy development; 3. Please do not use inflammatory language (sexually explicit, political, etc.); 4. If you believe your document truly has no problems, please contact customer support." (See Figure 1) Other posts about the Tiananmen massacre, the Shanwei crackdown incident, and Tibet independence remained visible to users inside and outside of China for about two months after the blog's creation, but then the site was taken down, with the site address returning a "read error" message to anybody visiting the page from any country.⁶⁵

Blogbus: The blogging service founded by Shanghai entrepreneur and technologist Isaac Mao, Blogbus has an automated keyword filtering system for censoring content. When I posted politically sensitive phrases like "Taiwan independence" and "Falun Gong" into the titles and post bodies, the post was allowed to go through, but appeared on the public site with an "*" in place of each character in the banned phrase. The blog remained publicly visible and was not taken down.⁶⁶

DoNews: This blog hosting service prevented me from posting anything with "falun Gong" in the title or body, though it did allow me to post on Taiwan independence and Tibetan independence. The blog remained accessible after 24 hours. On the third day, however, attempts to access the blog were redirected to the DoNews homepage, and attempts to log in to the user account were greeted with a message saying: "there is no such user."⁶⁷

As the above results show, the Chinese government is not particularly concerned with the detailed means used to "manage" user content as long as the results are satisfactory. According to blog hosting company executives who speak on condition of anonymity, "success" is measured on the company's end by a decrease in the number of phone calls received from various government departments complaining about content. When the frequency of calls increases, companies know they need to tighten controls further in order to avoid trouble.

MSN Spaces: Foreign Censorship Compliance

MSN Spaces: Filtering and manual content control on Microsoft's Chinese edition of MSN spaces tightened in between my first test of their Chinese language service in June 2005, and my subsequent test in December 2005. In June, I was prevented from entering politically provocative words into the blog's overall title, but was able to post anything I wanted into the titles and text bodies of individual posts.⁶⁸ Creating a new blog in mid-December, I was blocked from posting politically sensitive words such as "falun gong" (a banned religious group), "Tiananmen incident" and "Tibetan independence" in the titles of individual blog posts. When I tried to save them I was greeted with the error message: "This item contains forbidden language. Please remove the forbidden language from this item." (See Figure 2) I was successful in posting the same "forbidden language" in the body of blog posts. However, when I went back to check the blog roughly 48 hours later, the entire blog was no longer accessible.⁶⁹ It is important to note that the inaccessible blog was moved or removed at the server level, on servers inside the United States, and that the blog remains inaccessible from the United States as well as from China. This means that the action was not taken by Chinese authorities responsible for filtering and censoring the Internet for Chinese viewers, but by MSN staff at the level of the MSN servers.

Soon after I conducted this experiment with MSN Spaces, Microsoft's blog-censorship practices exploded into the public spotlight. The blog of Chinese news researcher Zhao Jing, writing under the pseudonym Michael Anti, was taken down from MSN Spaces servers on December 30th.⁷⁰

In 2005 Zhao had become one of China's edgiest journalistic bloggers, often pushing at the boundaries of political acceptability. He had started blogging on MSN spaces in August 2005 after his original blog hosted by the Scotland-based company Blog-City.com was blocked by Chinese ISP's.⁷¹ In December Zhao used his blog to speak out when propaganda authorities cracked down on *Beijing News*, a relatively new tabloid with a national reputation for exposing corruption and official abuse. The editor and deputy editors were fired and more than 100 members of the newspaper's staff walked out in protest. Zhao covered the crackdown extensively on his blog, discussing behind-the-scenes developments, supported the walkout and called for a reader boycott of the newspaper. Microsoft told the *New York Times* that MSN Spaces staff deleted Zhao's blog "after Chinese authorities made a request through a Shanghai-based affiliate of the company."⁷²

Public outcry and criticism of Microsoft's action was so strong in the United States that by late January, Microsoft decided to alter its Chinese blog censorship policy.⁷³ Called to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives in February to explain its collaboration with Chinese government censorship requirements, Microsoft outlined the following guidelines which made an effort to provide transparency while still complying with Chinese censorship requirements:

First, explicit standards for protecting content access: Microsoft will remove access to blog content only when it receives a legally binding notice from the government indicating that the material violates local laws, or if the content violates MSN's terms of use.

Second, maintaining global access: Microsoft will remove access to content only in the country issuing the order. When blog content is blocked due to restrictions based on local laws, the rest of the world will continue to have access. This is a new capability Microsoft is implementing in the MSN Spaces infrastructure.

Third, transparent user notification: When local laws require the company to block access to certain content, Microsoft will ensure that users know why that content was blocked, by notifying them that access has been limited due to a government restriction. Our ongoing reviews may result in other changes of policy as we continue to examine our options and seek the input of a broad array of experts. In addition to active discussions within the industry and with the Executive branch, we have been meeting with NGO's focused on issues of human rights in China and will continue those discussions. We are seeking the advice of recognized experts on China to better understand the dynamics and trends affecting the issues we are addressing here. And we will continue to discuss these issues with Members of Congress, including testimony before appropriate Committees such as this one.⁷⁴

Testifying before the same Congressional Committee, Google's representative pointed out that despite having rolled out a filtered version of its search engine at Google.cn, Google had decided not to implement a Chinese version of its blogging service, Blogger.com, in order to avoid being placed in the position of censor as Microsoft had been. According to written testimony by Google's Elliot Schrage: "Other products – such as Gmail and Blogger, our blog service – that involve personal and confidential information will be introduced only when we are comfortable that we can provide them in a way that protects the privacy and security of users' information."⁷⁵

It remains to be seen at this writing how or whether Microsoft's efforts to institute greater accountability and transparency will be adopted by MSN Spaces' domestic Chinese competition. This is likely to depend upon the market and user demand: if MSN Spaces continues to grow more quickly than its Chinese domestic competition, and if the Chinese blog-hosting companies determine that the greater transparency is one of the reasons behind this growth, there is a chance that the Chinese companies may attempt to follow - but only if the government allows them enough leeway to do so.

Impact and Nature of Censorship

Due to the political context in which Chinese bloggers operate, unlike in the United States there is no cohesive "A-list" of influential Chinese political bloggers, or at least not one that is easily tracked and documented. Instead as Ethan Zuckerman points out, the highest-trafficked Chinese blogs tracked by international blog-tracking services such as Technorati and Blogpulse are mainly MSN blogs providing technical tips and graphics that people can use to customize their blogs.⁷⁶ According to Fang Xingdong of Bokee (whose 3.2 million blogs do not appear to be tracked by Technorati and Blogpulse), the Bokee blog generating the most traffic as of December 2005 is a site providing pre-

prepared political essays which Communist Party members can copy, adjust slightly with their own personal information, and submit at the ideological education sessions they're required to attend in order to advance within the Party.⁷⁷ (Advancement within the Chinese Communist Party facilitates advancement within most government careers, decisionmaking positions in media and the arts, and even in many large Chinese commercial enterprises.) As Xiao Qiang points out, the popularity of these ideological essay blogs doesn't mean that China's blog-reading population is passionate about communist ideology. Rather, they are very similar in function to the most highly trafficked MSN Spaces blogs - except that they provide political tips, tricks, and "hacks" rather than technical ones. The Chinese IT blogger "Keso," is cynically delighted with this phenomenon:

"The website deceives party members, the party members deceive their leaders, their leaders deceive the leaders of their leaders, and in the end everybody is deceiving the Party. That is the comedy of this era..."⁷⁸

Despite the fact that he is writing on DoNews, a blog hosting service that clearly does monitor and censor blogger content, Keso remains within the bounds of tolerated political speech, and is not prevented by his blog host from laughing publicly at the Communist Party in this way. The people leaving comments in the thread following Keso's post take much more direct pot shots at the party, laughing directly and very cynically at the system. As of the time of writing, Keso has not been compelled to delete them.

It is common that bloggers who post politically sensitive content find themselves having to move their blogs regularly: leaving one blog host and starting a new blog with a new web address hosted by a different service. The Guangzhou-based blogger, Wozy, describes the process of moving his blog five times in 2005.⁷⁹ Censorship appears to be triggered most often when bloggers try to use their blogs to promote organized political action, not just talk. After police gunned down protesting villagers in Southern China, Sichuan-based blogger Wang Yi posted the text of a petition condemning the crackdown and likened it to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. (Wang had only recently created this blog after his original site was taken down by another blog hosting service approximately one month before.) Wang's blog host, Bokee, deleted the letter less than 12 hours after he had posted it.⁸⁰ Then Wang merely posted the title of the petition and names of the petitioners, and this was visible at least until December 19th. However by December 22nd Bokee had shut down Wang's blog entirely.⁸¹ In an interesting twist, Wang wrote that he hired a lawyer took some kind of legal action which caused Bokee to restore his blog. The details of what happened are not clear. The posts that caused his blog to be shut down remained deleted from the restored blog.⁸²

While the blog of Zhao Jing a.k.a Michael Anti was censored by MSN Spaces, many other blogs (many of them on MSN Spaces) discussing his case, re-publishing his final posts, and generally expressing sympathy with his situation were not censored. Soon after Anti's takedown, an interesting essay by a blogger named Chiu Yung began to circulate in the Chinese blogosphere, arguing that MSN did the right thing by "sacrificing" Anti. If it hadn't, reasoning went, the entire MSN Spaces service would become unavailable to all Chinese bloggers, and that would be a greater loss. The essayist writes that Chinese

people should thank MSN for the same reason they should thank the U.S. for not implementing sanctions. Then he goes on to say:

The disgraceful thing is, its a fact that Chinese people are on a lower rung than other people. It doesnt matter if you are applying for a visa or if you are traveling abroad as a tourist or if you go online. Of all the world's MSN Spaces users, only Chinese users can be shut down, but we still have no choice but to use it. This is kind of like when we go to get American visas, it doesn't matter how much hassle, we still must find some way to get one. Once there was a [Chinese] countryman who had emigrated to Australia. He had gotten an Australian passport primarily not because it was convenient for him to travel, but because he couldn't stand the feeling he got when, going through Chinese customs with a Chinese passport, the Chinese customs officials would eye him so coldly. I realized, the Chinese people are a rung lower than everybody else not because the foreigners look down on us. It's because Chinese people devalue other Chinese people; Chinese people don't treat their own people like humans.⁸³

Chiu Yung's point being that Chinese people themselves are ultimately responsible for allowing their fellow countrymen to be censored, and that the ultimate solution is going to have to be initiated by the Chinese themselves. The comments thread on Chiu's original post is long, with a variety of views about the essay, some agreeing with the initial argument about the necessity of Anti's sacrifice, and others disagreeing. My favorite comment is one that says: "The world is getting flatter but the great wall is getting thicker."

Even while Chinese bloggers are willing to talk about censorship and its underlying causes, as of early 2006 Chinese blog-hosting companies and other Chinese with the power to negotiate with authorities had not seen fit to resist or push directly against censorship requirements. Chinese bloggers and blog-hosting businesses themselves have generally viewed censorship as part of the necessary tradeoff required for online speech, as the following section will demonstrate.

Chinese Bloggers' Self-Perceptions: Glass Half Full

For the most part, Chinese bloggers expressed tremendous surprise at the outrage and attention Anti's takedown generated outside China. Despite a situation that looks rather dire and oppressive from the perspective of people who live in Western democracies, outsiders are surprised to discover that many Chinese bloggers rankle at the Western media's focus on censorship of blogs, to the exclusion of many other - often much more subtle - positive accomplishments of the Chinese blogosphere. Journalist Wang Xiaofeng, author of a popular blog, "Massage Milk," explains how liberating the experience of blogging has been for him - not only because he faces fewer ideological constraints, but also because the format frees him from what he feels to be the editorial straightjacket of the edited, printed word: "The Internet lets writing become lighter, and the Internet also liberates the traditional media from its stodgy, serious and formal language by offering another means of expression."⁸⁴ Wang, whose blog received an international award and is widely popular, is masterful in the use of subtle language that deals with sensitive subjects indirectly, thus enabling discussion without getting shut down.⁸⁵ "Laohumiao"

the pseudonymous author of the Blogbus-hosted blog "24 Hours Online," recently wrote a post about how blogs are "a bacchanalia of free speech" compared to what has been possible before.⁸⁶ A recent Chinese academic paper about Chinese blogs in the global context proposes that even in China, the blogosphere may gradually help create the kind of Habermasian "public sphere" necessary for a more democratic discourse in China.⁸⁷

In November 2005, a group of bloggers involved with one of China's earliest group blogs, CNblog.org, organized the first-ever Chinese bloggers' conference in Shanghai. I attended the conference and helped to live-blog it in English.⁸⁸ The event was videocast and there was a live IRC (Internet relay chat) enabling participation from people all around China and around the world as well. Despite the fact that some of the attendees have had to move their blogs and others were running blog-hosting services that engage in censorship, the gathering was not a meeting about censorship and limitations. Rather it was a celebration of empowerment and new possibilities.⁸⁹

At the conference, Blogbus founder Isaac Mao in his opening keynote talked about the power of many small voices. On the web, "everybody is somebody." What's more, Chinese web users are increasingly reacting to events taking place in their lives, in real time, online. "We are all grassroots. We are all small voices," he says. "The combination of all these small voices will make our society smarter."⁹⁰ He spoke about his Social Brain Foundation, based on the idea that the web enables people to plug their brains directly into an open network.⁹¹ "In the past, you could only share information with society in the structure given to you by authorities." Those are not the kind of information tools we want, he believes. "We want ways to share information freely."⁹² One blogger who writes under the name "Zuola" described how his blog is his personal platform for his own ideas - a platform that was not possible for people like himself prior to the advent of the blog in China. Blogging, he believes, helps us understand our own lives and the lives of our peers better than before.⁹³ Chen Xuer, one of the bloggers who volunteered to work on the conference, said he started blogging and reading blogs because he wanted "to hear the truth and speak the truth."⁹⁴ Despite the political environment, which largely went unmentioned, participants at the conference made it clear that they are able to communicate at least much more of the "truth" than was ever possible or conceivable before - maybe not larger or overtly political truths, but certainly many other truths about events in their lives and the people around them.

Another key theme of the whole conference was how the "semantic web" - the web of conversation that weblogs weave across the Internet via hyperlinks, tagging and rss feeds - empowers and amplifies individual voices. The Chinese bloggers showed that they have adopted the language of the semantic web, made it theirs, and have invented some of their own terms to help describe what's happening. In the session on tagging, blogger Zhang Yang spoke of "microfunction": a term he uses to describe the way we connect pieces of micro-content together through tagging, RSS and search.⁹⁵ Blogger "Topku Chan" spoke of "keyvoice" - as opposed to "keyword" - as the essence of what people should be paying attention to and tracking when it comes to conversations on the web.⁹⁶ At the core of each of these concepts was the belief that small, individual,

unknown voices can find connections with one another and thus be heard, and make a difference.

One especially impassioned speaker was Shanghai educator Zhuang Xiuli, who believes that blogs and social media tools may potentially play a big role in reforming China's ossified educational system. She spoke of the need to move from rote learning to individual discovery and creativity, and the way in which blogging encourages new more creative and individual-centric ways of learning. She spoke of how blogs and RSS can help teachers share information with students in new ways. She also believes that student blogs and RSS aggregation of those blogs can help teachers get to know students better than would be physically possible in large classes of 40-plus kids.⁹⁷ She said that even some education ministry officials are blogging in an effort to share and exchange information in a better and more open way than before.⁹⁸

When the meeting was over, several bloggers expressed annoyance that Western media reporters interviewing them about the meeting seemed interested only in the censorship angle. After some bloggers complained about post-conference experiences being interviewed by the BBC, Wang Jianshuo wrote: "The problem I see besides the two worlds are, there are too many pre-defined questions like censorship and BBC is trying to find piece of information, filter it and create an exciting picture for people in the "civilized" world. . . . The reason I was not comfortable with the interview is not talking about censorship. The problem is, I don't want to be put into a condition that there is a pre-set conclusion and my role is just to act as a victim in the story and confirm it."⁹⁹ While not denying that censorship is an issue, many Chinese bloggers hold the view that the real story going on in the Chinese blogosphere is not one of oppressed victims who are waiting to be liberated. It is a story of tenacious optimists, slowly and patiently pushing back the boundaries, believing that in the end, history is on their side. Here is how Hong Kong blogger Roland Soong, who regularly translates content from the Chinese language blogosphere into English, puts it:

"How can blogs become influential in socio-political-economic matters? Do you think that it will happen the day after freedom of speech is announced? No! So how do we set up the conditions such that blogs become influential? You work that out by trial and experiment. And there will come a day when you won't even need an official pronouncement of freedom of speech because you are too numerous by then and you have the freedom already *de facto* because there isn't a thing that the authorities can do anymore ... "¹⁰⁰

A frequent theme in posts by Chinese bloggers about the Western media - even though they chafe at the constraints they face themselves - is what they perceive as the arrogance, laziness, and manipulativeness of the Western press, despite the fact that Western journalists are functioning in a much freer political context. One example of this view can be seen in recent discussions of the way in which the Western media in general covered political violence in the Southern Chinese village of Taishi in the summer of 2005 - and how that coverage became discredited when a traumatized young Guardian reporter, Benjamin Joffe-Walt, filed an inaccurate report about a rural activist's death. Roland Soong writes:

Throughout all this, we all recognize the *tristesse*. Freedom of press does not exist in China today, so a full story of Taishi village will not be told in the Chinese media. It is up to the international media to reveal the truth of the matter through their privileged status and that may make a real difference. Yet, there was very little about Taishi village that appeared in the western media until the moment came when the myth of the power of the western media to speak the truth was ruined in the case of Benjamin Joffe-Walt and The Guardian.¹⁰¹

The message one gets from these discussions is that even Chinese bloggers who chafe at the regime often do not trust the Western media. Part of the reason for this lack of trust is that these offers of help tend to be viewed as a patronizing byproduct of foreigners' pity towards the helpless Chinese victims of their own government. This is clearly not how most Chinese bloggers want to be viewed. Despite the political constraints they face every day, Chinese bloggers generally do not see themselves as victims. Rather, bloggers such as the conveners of the Shanghai conference as well as many of the Chinese web entrepreneurs who run blog-hosting companies wanted to be recognized for their substantial achievements in creating new spaces for public discourse - despite the challenging political circumstances.

Thus it was not entirely surprising that discussion in the February 2006 U.S. Congressional hearings of what Americans can or should do to decrease censorship of Chinese bloggers was met in the Chinese blogosphere with considerable bemusement. Keso wrote that he found members of the U.S. congress, with their "high-flying language" to be every bit as disingenuous and politically self-serving as the Chinese officials who insist nobody has ever been arrested for online speech. "In the end all they care about is their political survival." He found it pretty "unbelievable," though, that 4 powerful U.S. companies have to go in front of the U.S. congress and discuss whether or not they owe an apology to the Chinese people.¹⁰² Says another blogger: "How strange for to have our adversary speaking up for our people."¹⁰³

Blogger Zhao Jing, a.k.a. Michael Anti, whose censorship experience had created the uproar leading to Congressional hearings, wrote an impassioned open letter titled: "The Freedom of Chinese Netizens Is Not Up To The Americans." "When the US Congress proposes Internet freedom of information legislation," he wrote, "this is truly treating the freedom of the Chinese netizens as maids that they can dress up as they see fit." He argues that freedom of speech can only be achieved by Chinese people themselves:

The only true way of solving the Internet blockage in China is this: every Chinese youth with conscience must practice and expand their freedom and oppose any blockage and suppression every day. This is the country that we love. Nobody wants her to be free more than we do. I am proud to be your compatriot.¹⁰⁴

But will a critical mass of Chinese bloggers and Internet users be willing to openly defy censorship? That certainly did not appear to be the case based on the conversations during and after the November 2005 Shanghai bloggers' conference. Despite recent events in which censored editors and journalists have turned to blogs to get their message out, it appears that the greater blogging masses in China are more passionately concerned

with other things. Scanning the Chinese blogs after the congressional hearings, a blogger writing under the pseudonym “Tian Yi” wrote at *Global Voices*: “Other than Keso and Anti, the rest of the Chinese bloggers seem pretty quiet on this issue.” He has some theories about the reason: “The Chinese government has suppressed reporting on this US congressional hearing in the mainstream media in China, which must have contributed to the relative silence on this issue in the Chinese-language blogosphere. Meanwhile, there is indication that the Chinese netizens are not as excited by this issue as their foreign counterparts.”¹⁰⁵ Hong Kong blogger Roland Soong, a close follower of the Chinese blogosphere, makes the harsher observation: “the more important thing is that there is next to zero discussion about any issues related to Google, MSN and Yahoo inside China! These are regarded as simply western exercises in self-absorption, self-indulgence and self-flagellation, and completely alien to the Chinese situation.”¹⁰⁶

“Tian Yi” points out that a much hotter topic of conversation at the time of the congressional hearings on Chinese censorship was a lawsuit popularly known in China as “The Steamed Bun Case:” Film director Chen Kaige (best known in the “West for Farewell to My Concubine”) sued blogger Hu Ge for intellectual property violation after Hu made a silly spoof of Chen’s movie, “The Promise” (known in the West as “Master of the Crimson Armor.” The 20-minute online video spoof, titled “The Bloody Case that Started Over A Steamed Bun,” was met with great mirth in Chinese cyberspace and quickly spread over thousands of sites, despite legal efforts to prevent this.¹⁰⁷ The gossip-hungry Chinese blogosphere was further delighted when Chen’s ex-wife, publisher and Internet entrepreneur Hung Huang, weighed in to mock Chen with rapier wit and clever turn of phrase on her own blog. Mid-to-late February 2006, Hung’s blog, Hu Ge’s blog, and other blogs involved in the Steamed Bun Incident were among the highest-rated on the Sina.com blog portal and other portals.¹⁰⁸ Roland Soong translates a passage summing up the situation by Wang Xiaofeng, author of the popular *Massage Milk* blog:

The emergence of parodies tells something — that people are skeptical of and disgusted with mainstream culture. They have no choice about the things that are forced upon them. The Chinese people are pitiful because they only see just a few Chinese-made movies each year without any choice. They are disgusted with the sham that is mainstream culture but they have no choice. But they don’t have the right to speak out, so the consequence of this disgust is to deconstructive methods to “bring down” the manufactured products.¹⁰⁹

In early 2006, the majority of Chinese bloggers appeared more interested at the moment in fighting bad movies than in fighting political battles.

Thus, it was clear in 2005 and 2006 that most Chinese bloggers and creators of other forms of online participatory media were not interested in leading an overt movement for political change in China. One must also keep in mind, however, that the people blogging online are the most inclined to view their glass as half full as opposed to half empty when it comes to personal freedoms: they are the educated urban elites who have benefited more than any other segment of the Chinese population from the past 20 years of economic reforms. There would need to be a much more profound and acute offline crisis for this group of people to find it worth risking the online and offline freedoms they have gained in exchange for the very uncertain gamble that they might be able to gain even

more. This is especially the case when no viable national thought leader is able to emerge online under the current system of controls - and no viable alternative to the Chinese communist party has emerged offline either.

At the same time, one might ask whether a successful revolt against bad movies and apparatchik-approved culture might be a prerequisite before successful political discourse can be possible. If so, the real cultural revolution that emerged in Chinese cyberspace in 2005 and 2006 could have long-term political consequences, even if in the short term it appeared to distract from political concerns.

CONCLUSION

The possibilities and consequences for action in Chinese cyberspace largely mirror the offline Chinese reality. The "screens" and "fly-swatters" placed by the regime in front of the newly opened window have largely been successful in preventing a democracy infestation - especially in the short term.

In the longer term, the space for civil discourse is quietly deepening, thanks to blogs and other forms of online citizens' media. And it appears that every inch of that space is being actively and cleverly utilized. If this civil discourse in Chinese cyberspace continues to mature, deepen and develop, that leads to a number of intriguing questions: Over the course of a generation, will a new group of Chinese emerge who have grown up debating public affairs, engaging in critical thinking and respecting the sanctity of the individual in ways that were not possible before? Will this new generation who have grown up using blogs and other forms of online participatory media be much more ready for reasoned self-governance than the current generation?

If current trends continue, the answer could well be "yes," though we must be mindful that the Internet and its conversations remain the realm of a minority. As of early 2006 only 8 percent of all Chinese were counted as Internet users. And according to the CASS 2005 study on urban Chinese Internet use: "a typical Internet user in China most likely is young, male, holding a job as a teacher or a white-collar worker with a high income, or a student."¹⁰ This is hardly representative of the Chinese population as a whole, which is rural, educated at primary or high school level, with low incomes. For the Internet - let alone blogs - to become a truly effective vehicle for representative, democratic discourse, many more people must be brought online and a substantial digital divide would need to be breached.

The CASS Internet study also found something very interesting, which shows that by opening the Internet window for fresh air, the Chinese government may indeed have managed to benefit not only the people it governs but also its own legitimacy. Over half of the 2005 survey respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the following statements about the Internet: "People will have better knowledge of politics" (62.8%); "Higher officials will be more aware of the common people's views" (60.4%); "Government can better serve the people" (55.3%); and "People have more opportunities

to criticize government policies" (54.2%). Fewer than half (45.1% - fewer than any of the other questions) agreed with the statement: "People can have more political power."¹¹¹ The study's authors conclude:

It is undeniable that the Internet is building a bridge between the governing and the governed in China. Based on this observation, more than half of the respondents believe that by going online the government can better serve its citizens, and citizens will have more outlets to critique public services.¹¹²

The CASS Internet study also points out that compared to survey results in other countries around the world under the auspices of the World Internet Project (WIP), the Internet has a more "significant" political impact in China than in other countries, both in terms of the relationship between the government and citizens as well as among people who share similar political interests. The authors conclude that "as Internet use becomes more popular in China, its impact on politics will be stronger."¹¹³

However we should be careful not to assume that the only possible "impact on politics" would be the simplistic process of one set of political power-holders being replaced by a new set of leaders.¹¹⁴ According to the CASS survey these efforts have been somewhat successful, giving China's online population a greater sense that an effort at greater transparency is being made, and the chances have increased that their feedback on policies will be heard. In this sense the Internet's impact on politics has some positive ramifications for state power that cannot be dismissed.

When it comes to political change or democratization, the impact of the Internet and blogs is more likely to be gradual and subtle - as opposed to sudden and dramatic political transformation. Weblogs are clearly hastening the Communist Party's loss of control over Chinese minds. Thanks to the Internet, the Party is losing control over Chinese culture and its evolution - and with it, losing the ability to shape Chinese young people's values and priorities. The Communist party is also losing its ability to guide intellectual discourse amongst China's educated elites. Blogs are playing their part in creating an independent space for discourse. Also thanks to the Internet and blogs, the government and party are losing control over the ways in which people interact with one another. Physical distances are no longer the barrier they once were for people with common concerns and interests. All of these factors can be expected to contribute to major socio-political change in the long run.

But in a system where people have not been encouraged to think for themselves, either in schools or in the course of their jobs, many Chinese bloggers themselves believe it's important to free the Chinese mind before freeing Chinese politics, if Communist Party propaganda is to be replaced by anything other than some other form of herd-mentality and demagoguery. The Spring 2005 anti-Japan riots are just one example of how Chinese netizens are easily inflamed and manipulated by rhetoric. After the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2004, many Chinese netizens, inspired by the Chinese media's anti-U.S. rhetoric over the preceding months, cheered the attacks.¹¹⁵ Speaking at the World Summit for the Information Society in Tunis in November 2005, blogger Isaac Mao pointed out that it's too early to talk about democracy or even free speech in China

because the Chinese people must first learn how to think and reason independently: "free thinking is more important than free speech right now," he said. Mao believes that the blogosphere is the ideal arena in which to learn how to think critically about issues, debate, and win others over to your point of view through reasoned argument.¹¹⁶

While Internet communications can inspire people in China to demonstrate or riot, Internet discourse in China is unlikely to lead to more constructive political organization or action while state censorship and surveillance mechanisms remain focused on preventing exactly that type of activity. And as Michael Anti and other bloggers pointed out in their recent discussions of censorship, that system of censorship and surveillance will remain in place as long as large numbers of Chinese continue to accept it as well as collaborate with it. This catch-22 is likely to continue unless and until some offline event or series of events cause a critical mass of people - including people who run Internet businesses - to decide reject censorship overtly and actively.

Thus, if one combines the growing online space for private civic discourse provided by blogs with a functionally effective system of censorship and filtering, the result appears to be a recipe for very gradual, slow evolution - not democratic revolution. Outside observers of Internet and politics in China would do well to focus on the impact of blogs beyond the narrow scope of overt political protest and obvious political change. Most Western media attention focuses on those instances where bloggers clash with government censors or the web hosting companies who act as proxies for government censors. But to look only at these instances of conflict is to miss a great deal of what is really happening, much more quietly, under the surface. Powerful socio-political change can be expected to emerge as a result of the millions of online conversations taking place daily on the Chinese Internet: conversations that manage to stay comfortably within the confines of censorship. With each passing day, these conversations do their quiet part to move the collective Chinese mind yet another step further from government control.

Figure 1: Error message on Blogcn admin page upon trying to post text saying "I practice Falun Gong every day.": "1. The content you have submitted contains sensitive terms; 2. for the sake of Blogcn's healthy development; 3. please do not use inflammatory language (sexually explicit, political, etc.); 4. if you believe your document truly has no problems, please contact customer support." (Screenshot taken December 2005)

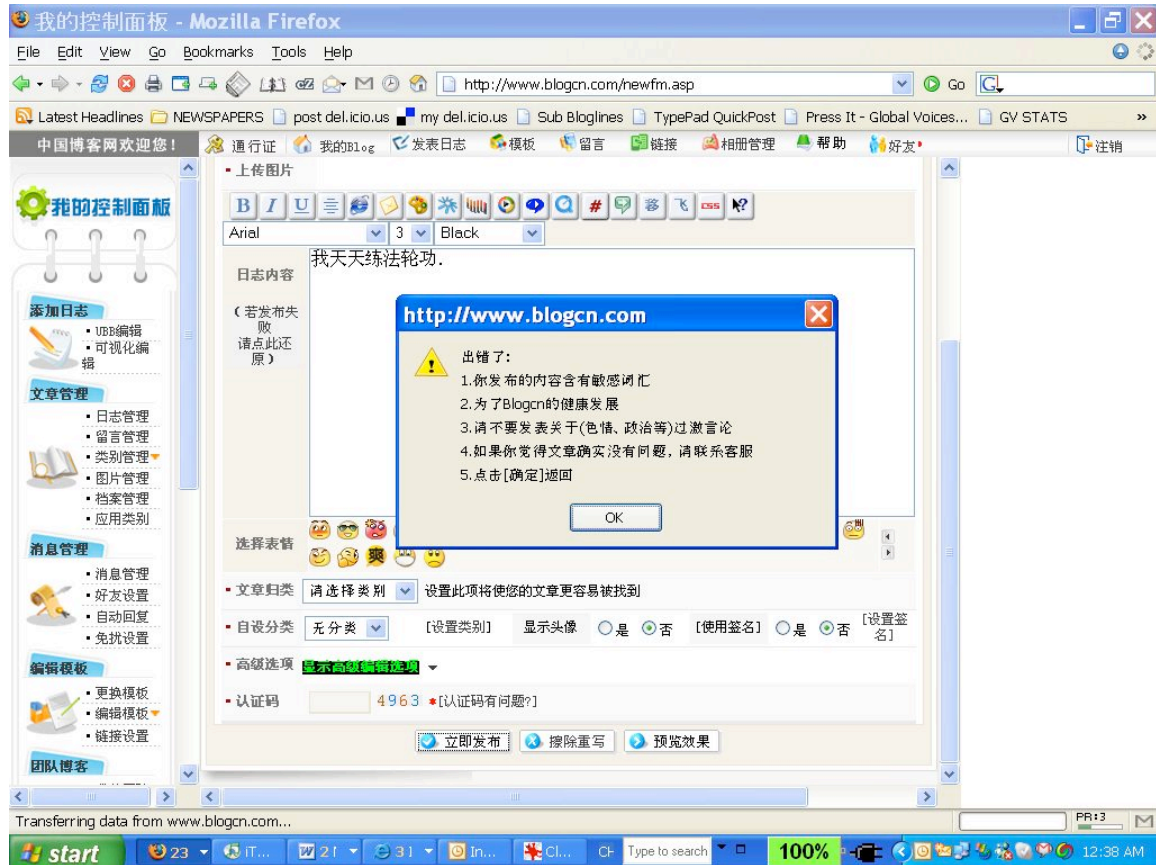
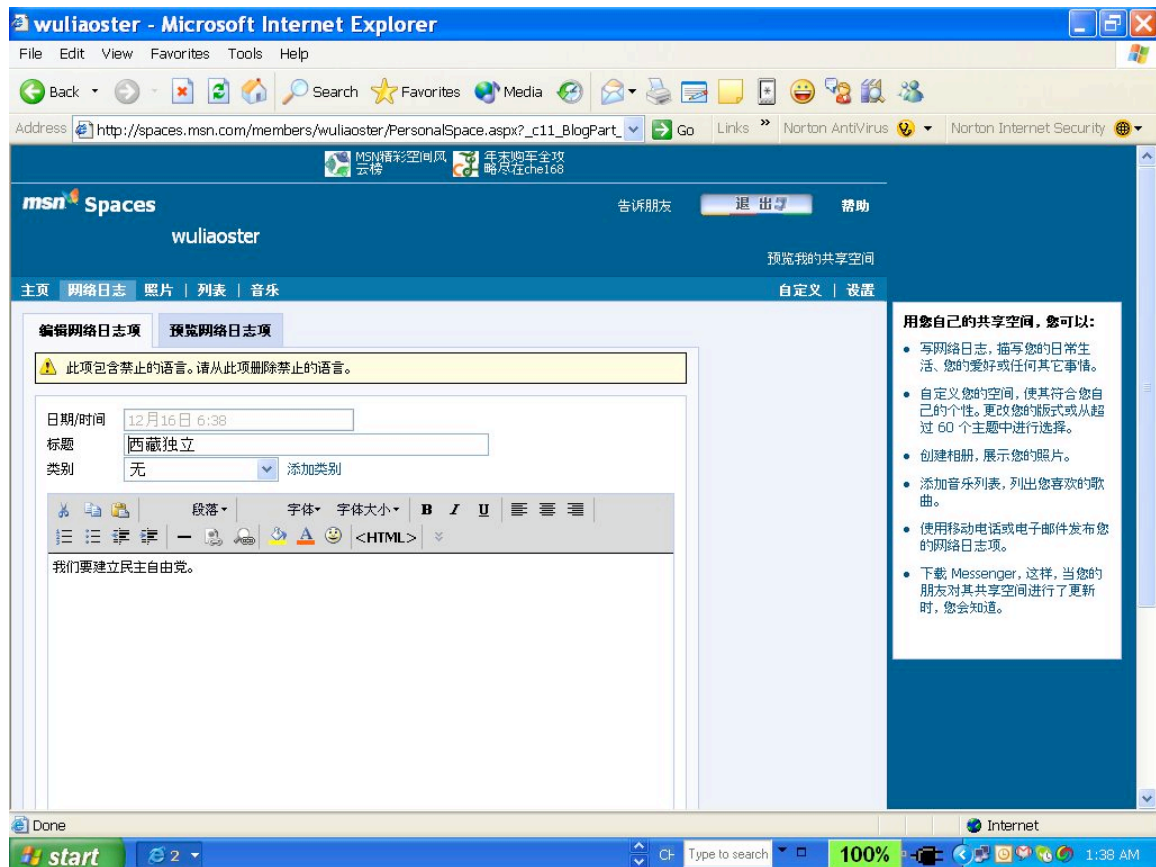


FIGURE 2: MSN Spaces Censorship

Error message: "This item contains forbidden language. Please remove the forbidden language from this item." (Screenshot taken December 2005)



¹ Hearing: The Internet in China: A Tool for Freedom or Suppression? U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, February 15, 2006. For transcripts and original text of all statements see: http://www.house.gov/international_relations/aphear.htm

² Nicholas D. Kristof, "Death by a Thousand Blogs," *The New York Times* May 24, 2005, Section A, Page 21, Column 1,

³ OpenNet Initiative, "Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study," at: <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/>

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