



Internet in China

The Internet in China: A Symposium

Introduction >
China

China's first email, according to legend, was sent by professor QIAN Tianbai and was entitled 'Crossing the Great Wall to join the world'. Since that first email was sent on 20 September 1987, China has been using the internet in remarkable ways, making the Great Wall not just crossable, but rather meaningless.

By Randolph Kluver

The growth of China's internet has been astounding. With the number of internet users doubling every 18 months or so, China's 'virtual' presence on the development of the worldwide phenomenon is making itself felt. This can be seen in the proliferation of Chinese-language websites on servers worldwide and in the rising number of non-Chinese owned sites, including those of the American National Football League and the National Basketball Association, that now cater to Chinese surfers with Chinese-language sites. Furthermore and much to the consternation of internet freedom activists, computer hardware and software companies have begun to design their products with the recommendations of the Chinese government in mind (Walton, 2001). The Chinese delegation, moreover, was successful in marginalizing the concerns of non-governmental organizations at the UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society in 2003.

In many ways, the Chinese government's new influence on the development of the internet is surprising, perhaps the very opposite of what most politicians, journalists, and academics assumed would happen, namely that the internet would change China. From the inception of the online era, dramatic proclamations left little doubt that the internet would fundamentally and irrevocably transform Chinese society, economics, and politics. It has now become clear that the impact of the internet on China, the rest of Asia, and the world, is much more nuanced than the early advocates thought.

Technological indeterminism

The worldwide growth of the internet has spawned speculation about what it will come to mean for individuals, corporations, organizations, and governments. A priori assumptions about the technological characteristics of the internet – such as it being decentralized, networked, and user driven – are the base for much of this speculation, which assumes a kind of technological determinism: the conviction that certain social and political implications

were inherent to the technology. Yet, contrary to the expectations of technological determinism, users around the world are interacting with, refining, and even changing the technology to suit their own purposes.

In China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and other Asian nations that have plunged headlong into the information age, we observe a reciprocal relationship behind the transformation of the internet and society. The internet creates new opportunities for social and individual change; but it can just as quickly become another instrument of control. Appropriated by governments, corporations, and perhaps most importantly, by teenagers, the internet today fulfils functions undreamed of a few years ago.



Courtesy of the Committee to Protect Journalists

information, uncensored by their government, and the opportunity to publish information, to interact on significant issues, and to mobilize more effectively, the Chinese government was introducing the proverbial camel's nose under the tent that would eventually lead to the wholesale collapse of the Chinese state. A number of recent studies (and the essay by YANG Guobin in this issue) provide evidence that the Chinese population is indeed gaining a new element of empowerment in its relations with the government.

Rather than starting from the premises of technological determinism, or abstract speculation about how the technology will alter China, each of these authors begin by analysing realities on the ground. Most importantly, how do Chinese users use the internet? Only through understanding how the internet is actually being used, adapted, and integrated into the lives of its users can we begin to anticipate the changes that might occur.

Sources on the Chinese internet

There are two primary sources of information on the internet in China. The China Internet Network Information Center's (CNNIC) semi-annual Survey Reports on the Internet in China are the most comprehensive, including among others, the number of online users, computer hosts, and domain names. While CNNIC data is the most commonly cited, private researchers often question its reliability. There are endless ways to define 'internet user', for example, and differing definitions and sampling methodologies yield different results. In January 2004 the CNNIC released its thirteenth semi-annual survey. Its findings were in line with expectations: in six months, the number of users had grown by approximately 12 million while the number of China-hosted websites had increased by 25 per cent, to 60 million.

A second source of data on Chinese internet use is the work of GUO Liang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Guo, conducting research on internet use in China under the auspices of the World Internet Project, released a nuanced and in-depth report

funded by the Markle Foundation in 2003 (CASS Internet Report 2003). Unlike the CNNIC study, the CASS study is based on interviews with Chinese net users in twelve cities, and provides a richer account of how people actually use the internet, as well as their expectations of it. The report does not attempt to tally the total number of users in the country, but aims instead at a more in-depth understanding of internet users across China.

Guo's surveys reveal that most internet users, as well as non-users, believe the internet is providing greater access to political information and opportunities for expression. They also believe that the competitive market place for internet service providers has provided real benefits to consumers, including better access.

World opinion and journalistic coverage of the internet in China feeds upon the stereotype of the government limiting access to the net, through both censorship and the erecting of technological barriers. There is little doubt that the government is concerned with the internet's potential to create instability. Lokman TSUI's essay in this volume provides a clear picture of the controls the government has implemented in its attempts to limit potential political trouble. At the same time, Guo's and the CNNIC surveys, reveal that the Chinese government sees the internet as an indispensable tool for economic growth and modernization, and is actively encouraging internet development on a number of fronts.

Political mobilization or marginalization?

The essays in this collection are organized around a point/counterpoint format. Yang Guobin takes the lead, demonstrating that the internet has done something quite remarkable in Chinese politics, in that it introduces an element of play, so that politics is no longer 'in command' but rather part and parcel of everyday discourse on the web. Yang's essay demonstrates that the internet has become part of the public sphere, both in allowing ordinary citizens to participate in political discussion, and in helping to redefine the nature of Chinese society, especially in citizens' relations to the state.

The subsequent essays are all written in response and while agreeing with Yang's central contention, qualify the potential of the net to be all that many hoped it would be. Lokman Tsui's essay focuses on the issue of state control, demonstrating that the Chinese government has developed a sophisticated approach that effectively precludes the ability of the internet to provide a space for active mobilization in opposition to

the Communist Party of China.

Ian Weber and LU Jia examine the commoditization of the internet in China, where corporations that control most of the content have no commercial incentive to provide platforms to criticize government policies. Weber and Lu argue that the Chinese government has, in significant ways, handed control of the internet to these corporations, and that international media conglomerates play a significant role in defining what the Chinese internet is becoming.

Finally, Jens Damm examines the internet's role within the larger social changes transforming China, where choice and liberty in a consumerist, postmodern society have contributed to social fragmentation rather than the enhanced public sphere envisioned by the internet's early enthusiasts. Damm also refocuses our attention on the internet's technological characteristics and finds that, in contrast to early expectations of decentralized technology leading to a decentralized nation, the 'code' of the internet is being rewritten in China in ways to maintain social and political stability, and economic growth.

It has become abundantly clear: the internet will impact on Chinese society and China will transform the internet. The Great Wall has become meaningless as a barrier to prevent foreign intrusion: the political, economic, and social forces that these essays bring to light may well shape the future of both China and the internet. <

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