# The Rise of Chinese Blogosphere and Intensified Control Efforts on the Chinese Internet

*Written Presentation of XIAO Qiang, Director, China Internet Project, The Graduate School of Journalism, University of California at Berkeley.*

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Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Distinguished Commission members,

My name is XIAO Qiang. I am the Director of the China Internet Project, at the Graduate School of Journalism of UC Berkeley. It is a privilege for me to be speaking in front of this important commission, and alongside my distinguished fellow panelists. My talk today will focus on the growing information flow on the Chinese Internet, and the Chinese government's intensified control in this regard.

Over 130 million Chinese are now online, and 440 million cell phones are in use in the country. Over the last eighteen months, two significant trends related to China's Internet development deserve our attention. The first is the explosive growth of the Chinese blogosphere and related new media technologies such as podcasting and photo/video sharing websites; and the second is pervasive and sophisticated government censorship, through legal and administrative regulations, together with surveillance, intimidation, imprisonment and propaganda measures. Today, I will provide some context and analysis for both phenomena, and also make recommendations to the US government on policy implications.

The number of bloggers has increased so rapidly in the past two years that there exists no accurate count of their number. In January of 2005, China was estimated to have around 500,000 bloggers. According the latest survey from the official China Internet Network Information Center, there were about **28 million blogs** in China by the end of July 2006. This is more than twice the number of bloggers in the US. This significant growth is mainly due to the fact that all the main China internet portals, such as Sina.com and Sohu.com, and other portal-like blog hosting services, such as bokee,com and Blogbus, started actively promoting blog applications among the over 130 million Chinese Internet users.

It is worth noting that all these Internet companies are funded through venture capital from the United States, and listed or aiming to be listed on the Nasdaq stock market. Development of the blogosphere is the result of both technology diffusion and Chinese government efforts to promote a knowledge-based economy in a global environment.

The unintended result, however, is the ability of Chinese citizens to create a public space to discuss public and political affairs, as well as creatively express themselves and build up social networks online. Unleashed in a personalized, accessible, and inexpensive medium, Chinese netizens, especially urban intellectuals, students and white collar workers have begun to use the Internet as the primary place to voice their opinions on personal or public affairs. Despite government efforts to control the information environment and mass media, in the highly decentralized and diversified blogosphere, bloggers communicate political views in such a manner as to bring many "hidden transcripts," once suppressed, into the light of public consideration.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Commission members,

Online discussions of current events, especially through Internet bulletin board systems (BBS) and Weblogs, or "blogs," are having real agenda-setting power. The Chinese government has devoted enormous financial resources to set up government-sponsored Web sites at all levels of government, from national to regional and provincial. About 10% of all websites are directly set up and run by the government, until bloggers arrives in Chinese cyberspace. But these official sites have signally failed to gain the trust of the young, urban and educated netizens. On the contrary, people simply go to any number of independent BBS and blogs, to read what they think is interesting. Popular BBS such as Tianya community and Xicihutong, and individual bloggers, enjoy far more online popularity, and therefore real influence among netizens, than official Web sites such as Xinhua.com.

This leads to my second point: the Chinese government's intensified control of the Internet. The Chinese government's ongoing efforts to control speech online and in print has been well-documented. But a series of new measures show that official control of expression has reached a new height in recent months. These measures range from the Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for China's Internet Industry, regulation of news and information, Internet cafe management, domain name management and website real name registration. The Commission's new report did an excellent job in documenting those censorship measures. Let me just focus on two telling examples from an important component of Internet control: **fear**.

In January 2006, the Shenzhen Public Security Bureau created animated images of a pair of police officers named "Jingjing" and "Chacha," (from "jingcha," or police.) These images, which appear on websites of Shenzhen City offices and private Shenzhen-based companies, provide links to the Internet police section of the Public Security website. By June, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security created similar online police mascots that were put into operation in eight major cities in China.

According to the official Chinese E-Governance Net website: "The main function of Jingjing and Chacha is to intimidate…… The Internet has been always monitored by police, the significance of Jingjing and Chacha's appearence is to publicly remind all netizens to be conscious of safe and healthy use of the Internet, self-regulate their online behavior, and maintain harmonious Internet order together."

Another important method to monitor Internet activities is the use of real-name registration. In June 2006, the Ministry of Information Industry (MII) ordered all weblogs and websites to register with the government or face closure.This registration will impose a true-name system on Web site owners. After registration one must display the electronic verification mark in a specific location on the Web site, and must also link to the MII supervision system for making inquiries. By doing this the identity of the Web site owner will be immediately clear.

These examples reveal that the Chinese government has learned to turn the digital and transparent properties of Internet technology into a surveillance and intimidation tool to control its citizens' behavior. The underlining mechanism works to instill fear among netizens that they are being watched. Of course, these new technologically-empowered control mechanisms are only effective when they are used together with intimidation in the physical space. In just the past two weeks, three cyber-dissidents - Zhang Jianhong,Yang Maodong and Chen Shuqing - have been arrested for their online publishing activities, according to the Paris-based Reporters without Borders. This combination of old-fashioned state control and the most advanced communication technology has a powerful chilling effect to enforce self-censorship in Chinese cyberspace.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Commission members,

Despite impressive economic growth over the last two decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faces a fundamental dilemma in that it wants to create an information-based economy, but lacks the political will to promote active political participation by Chinese citizens. The long-term survival of the CCP's power monopoly regime also critically relies on its ideological work and control of the information and symbolic environment.

But for China's one-party state, controlling the nature of the information available to its citizens has never been more difficult. Tens of millions of netizens are empowered by the new publishing platform. What's happening in the Chinese blogosphere is a power shift—not directly at the level of political institutions and law, but around the change of communication systems and the ability to shape the information and symbolic environment.

In the near future, we will see more and more efforts by the Chinese government to keep the information flow, online or off-line, under its control, using the mechanisms listed in the Commission's report, and mentioned in my presentation today. In the long term, however, I believe the Chinese censors are fighting a losing battle. The deeper problem here is that the Chinese Communist Party itself is morally bankrupt and intellectually exhausted. More regulations will not make official propaganda any more attractive or credible to Chinese netizens. Technological filtering and surveillance, real name registration, and even harsh police actions against political activists will not help the party gain legitimacy either. In my view, the rise of the blogosphere and other communication technologies such as cell phones and short text messages marks the beginning of the end of the CCP's ideological and propaganda control over Chinese society.

For this reason, in addition to close monitoring, more comprehensive and in-depth studies on the social and political implications of the Internet are crucial for the US-China policy-making process. Will this pervasive, many-to-many and emergent communication platform play a critical role in democratizing China? – or will Chinese Communist Party 's one party authoritarian regime ultimately domesticate Chinese cyberspace, turning it into an Orwellian monster? We need a better understanding of these questions if we want to understand this complex, rapidly changing and globally significant country.

I also want to bring the Commission's attention to another important document: "Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship," published by Human Rights Watch last month. The report documents the different ways in which American companies such as Yahoo!, Microsoft and Google are assisting and reinforcing the Chinese government's censorship system. The report also makes policy recommendations to both the US government and companies on how to address this serious issue.

Finally, I encourage the US government to be a more active player in developing and employing anti-censorship technologies, which will not only help Chinese people to gain direct access to information about US government sponsored websites such as Radio Free Asia and VOA, but also can contribute to greater information flow and freedom of expression in Chinese cyberspace. Ultimately, it's the Chinese people themselves who want a freer Internet and a freer society. The Great Firewall, no matter how advanced its technology and how much fear the government tries to instill, will crumble, and much sooner than the Great Wall. Neither repression nor censorship will stop China from becoming a more open and humane society in twenty first century.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.