From "Grass-Mud Horse" to "Citizen": A New Generation Emerges through China's Social Media Space

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Before The Congressional-Executive Commission on China's hearing "China's Censorship of the Internet and Social Media: The Human Toll and Trade Impact*"* on Thursday, November 17, 2011

Washington, DC.

Respectful Chairman, Representative Christopher Smith, Chairman, Cochairman Senator Sherrod Brown, and Distinguished Commission members,

My name is Xiao Qiang. I am the Founder and Chief Editor of bilingual China news website: China Digital Times, and the Principal Investigator of the Counter-Power Lab, at School of Information of UC Berkeley. My research focuses on identifying, documenting and indexing censorship in Chinese cyberspace and generating an online aggregator of censored, blocked and marginalized content. As part of this work, I closely follow the political conversations of Chinese netizens and interpret their coded discourse and terminology.

It is a privilege to speak in front of this important commission alongside my distinguished fellow panelists. My talk today will focus on the intensified and increasingly sophisticated Chinese state control and censorship of the Internet; the growing resistance to such censorship; the expanding online discourse; and the capacity of the Internet to advance free speech, political participation, and social change in China.

1. Government Censorship:

Since the mid-1990s, numbers of Internet users have grown exponentially and by late 2011, there are an estimated 450 million Internet users in China (perhaps tens of millions more if one counts the people who access the web through cell phones). While most of these people use the Web for entertainment, social networking, and commerce, the numbers of netizens engaged in political criticism are steadily growing and are now estimated to be between 10 and 50 million.

The government has employed a multilayered strategy to control and monitor online content and activities since the introduction of the Internet in China in 1987. Authorities at various levels use a complex web of regulations, surveillance, imprisonment, propaganda, and the blockade of hundreds of thousands of international websites at the national-gateway level ("the Great Firewall of China").

The government's primary strategy for shaping content is to hold Internet service providers (ISPs) and access providers responsible for the behavior of their customers; thus business operators have little choice but proactively to censor the content on their sites.

Business owners must use a combination of their own judgment and direct instructions from propaganda officials to determine what content to ban. In an anonymous interview with me, a senior manager at one of China's largest Internet portals acknowledged receiving instructions from either State Council Information Office or other provincial-level propaganda officials at least three times a day. Additionally, both the government and numerous websites employ people to read and censor content manually.

Sina Weibo is China's largest Twitter-like microblogging service with 250 million users, according to their own report in late 2011. It is also one of the most tightly controlled spaces on the Chinese Internet and is an example of how control works on various levels. According to one of the company's top executives, "Sina has a very powerful content censorship and infrastructure backup," which includes the ability to automatically monitor its users 24 hours a day while also utilizing hundreds of human monitors.

The same executive noted that monitoring content is Sina's "biggest headache," and entails intensive communication between editors and censors including emails updating the guidelines for monitoring content that are sent every hour. Editors are obligated to report on any "malicious" content, and repercussions for users can include private or public warnings, deletion of content or cancellation of user IDs. Users are rewarded for reporting malicious or pornographic content by clicking a button on the site's homepage. Individual keywords are also filtered on Sina Weibo search; my research group has uncovered over 820 filtered search terms, including "Cultural Revolution," "press freedom" and "propaganda department."

2. Netizens' Coded Resistance

The results of government censorship efforts are mixed at best. The government's pervasive and intrusive censorship system has generated equally massive resentment among Chinese netizens. As a result, new forms of social resistance and demands for greater freedom of information and expression are often expressed in coded language and implicit metaphors, which allow them to avoid outright censorship. The Internet has became a quasi-public space where the CCP's dominance is being constantly exposed, ridiculed, and criticized, often in the form of political satire, jokes, videos, songs, popular poetry, jingles, fiction, Sci-Fi, code words, mockery, and euphemisms.

In early 2009, a creature named the "Grass Mud Horse" appeared in an online video that became an immediate Internet sensation. Within weeks, the Grass Mud Horse—or *cao ni ma,* the homophone of a profane Chinese expression—became the de facto mascot of Chinese netizens fighting for free expression. It inspired poetry, videos, and clothing lines. As one blogger explained, the Grass Mud Horse represented information and ideas that could not be expressed in mainstream discourse.

The Grass Mud Horse was particularly suited to the contested space of the Chinese Internet. The government's pervasive and intrusive censorship has stirred resentment among Chinese netizens, sparking new forms of social resistance and demands for greater freedom of information and expression, often conveyed via coded language and metaphors adopted to avoid the most obvious forms of censorship. As a result, the Internet has became a quasi-public space where the CCP's dominance is being exposed, ridiculed, and criticized, often by means of satire, jokes, songs, poems, and code words.

Such coded communication, once whispered in private, is not new to China. Now, however, it is publicly communicated rather than murmured behind the backs of the authorities. For example, since censorship is carried out under the official slogan of "constructing a harmonious society," netizens have begun to refer to the censoring of Internet content as "being harmonized." Furthermore, the word "to harmonize" in Chinese (*hexie*) is a homonym of the word for "river crab." In folk language, *crab* also refers to a bully who exerts power through violence. Thus the image of a crab has become a new satirical, politically charged icon for netizens who are fed up with government censorship and who now call themselves the River Crab Society. Photos of a malicious crab travel through the blogosphere as a silent protest under the virtual noses of the cyber-police. Even on the most vigorously self-censored Chinese search engine, Baidu.com, a search of the phrase "River Crab Society" will yield more than 5.8 million results.

In recent years, Chinese netizens have shown they possess boundless creativity and ingenuity in finding such ways to express themselves despite stifling government restrictions on online speech. This "resistance discourse" steadily undermines the values and ideology that reproduce compliance with the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian regime, and, as such, force an opening for free expression and civil society in China. At China Digital Times, we have created an online "Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon," or a translated glossary of more than 200 such terms created and spread by netizens in China. Without understanding this coded but widespread (thanks to the Internet) "Grass-Mud Horse Discourse" through the lens of censorship and resistance, one cannot fully understand the contradictions in Chinese society today, and the potential and the possibilities for tomorrow.

3. Online Mobilization

Through online social networks and virtual communities, the Chinese Internet has become a substantial communications platform for aggregating information and coordinating collective action especially through the use of shared language, experiences and images.

For example, this information aggregation process can happen when a local issue resonates with a broader audience and spreads beyond the limited jurisdiction of local officials, sometimes even making it into the national media. When corruption or environmental damage, for example, are exposed, local authorities implicated in the scandal often crack down on news websites hosted within their respective jurisdictions. But when such news finds its way to a website based outside the relevant local jurisdiction, the officials of that jurisdiction will have no means of directly suppressing it. This gap in control between local authorities as well as between local and central authorities opens a space for netizens to transmit information.

Influential bloggers may also mobilize their fellow netizens by acting as spokespersons for certain issue positions, or by giving personal authentication to messages that resonate with the people, or by articulating what others could not say in the face of political censorship. Bestselling author, race-car driver, and blogger Han Han is one such figure. Han is an outspoken critic of government censorship, and his blog posts are often deleted by censors. Nevertheless, his main blog received more than 300-million hits between 2006 and 2009. In April 2010, *Time* magazine listed Han Han as a candidate for the hundred "most globally influential people." Han Han subsequently wrote a blog post asking the Chinese government "to treat art, literature, and the news media better, not to impose too many restrictions and censorship, and not to use the power of the government or the name of the state to block or slander any artist or journalist." This post generated some 25,000 comments from his readers and was viewed by more than 1.2 million people. The article has also been widely reposted online; in May 2010, a Google search found more than 45,000 links reposting all or part of the essay. Despite official efforts to use the Great Firewall to block Chinese netizens from voting for Han Han on *Time*'s website, he came in second in the final tally, showing the mobilizational power of his writing.

4. Role of Social Media Technologies and American Companies

It is not just Han Han's words that are so influential, but the social media technologies – search, file-sharing, RSS, blogging, microblogging, image and video-sharing, social networking, etc – that allow them to spread freely, despite government censorship.

On November 2, 2011, the State Council of Information Office issued directives to all national and local websites: "Thoroughly delete all information and commentaries about Ai Weiwei's "borrowing money to pay tax" event." This refers to the penalty of a $2.4 million back tax bill levied on dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who spent three months in jail this spring. Through the Internet, Ai called for loans from supporters around the world to pay the bill. Searching on Sina Weibo, one will found over a dozen words and phrases relating to "Ai Weiwei" have been recently blocked, and many such posts were soon deleted; however Ai Weiwei's call for loans has been reposted by devoted readers, and circulated through emails, instant chats, closed forums and private messages among users on a variety of social networking services. Ten days after the censor's decisive directive, days, about 30,000 people had sent in a combined total of 8.7 million yuan ($1.37 million) to pay Ai Weiwei's penalty, despite the state censor's full efforts to suppress his words from spreading.

This is what China's leaders most fear: the power of truth-telling among the Chinese population, which directly challenges their privilege, ideological control, and the legitimacy of the regime. The Chinese government has learned that it can't merely target Internet users, but must focus on information technologies, access to the network, and the companies that provide these tools. That's where American Internet companies enter the story. Because American Internet companies are not under the control of the government and therefore cannot be trusted to abide by the government's rules, they are most often prevented from entering the market on a level playing field, or simply blocked by the Great Firewall. Several top global websites, including Google, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as thousands of other websites, are no longer easily accessible. China's intrusive government policies effectively mark the beginning of a

cyberworld divided into the internet and the "Chinternet", with the Great Firewall marking the boundary.

5. Emergent New Political Identity

The Chinese government has the determination, resources and technology to make the Internet work in support of its ruling status quo. However, its dominance is constantly being contested by netizens' online civil disobedience and public demands for rights. The result of such interplay of censorship and digital resistance is an emerging pattern of public opinion and citizen participation that represents a shift of power in Chinese society. The Internet allows citizens to comment on certain (albeit limited) topics, and create their own shared discourse which is outside the bounds of government censorship and propaganda. In addition, an entire generation of online public agenda setters has emerged to become influential opinion leaders. I have observed a remarkable phenomenon that many of the most influential online opinion leaders appear to hold in common values supporting democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. These netizens, with their growing numbers, expanding social networks, political resilience, and increasing influence, seem to be evolving from "voices under domination" to "universal values advocates." This new, emerging generation of "Internet citizens" is becoming one of the most dynamic forces in setting the media agenda and fostering civil engagement on public issues in China, despite the government's control efforts. This new generation -- embodying alternative (liberal, democratic) political values and connected through the Internet -- will certainly change China's future course.

6. Recommendations to the US Government

Increasing funding to projects which aim to expand the free flow of information on the Internet, such as (1) projects which monitor Internet censorship, identify and archive censored content and make such contents re-accessible for netizens (2) development and deployment of counter-censorship technologies in support of online civil society, human rights and journalism communities in China and other countries with a censored Internet.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.