

## **Round-Table on Internet and Free Flow of Information in China**

### **Statement by David Cowhig, Wired China: Many Hands on Many Switches**

#### **Presented to Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

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I would like to share with you some thoughts about China and the Internet based on my five years covering the Internet for the Environment, Science and Technology Section of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. These are my own observations and musings about how Internet fits into the Chinese social and political system. My views expressed here do not reflect the views of the U.S. government and are not a policy prescription of any kind.

When asking the question "Whose Hand is on the Switch?" about the Internet in China we need to bear in mind that there are many hands and many switches. Chinese provincial and local governments and indeed various parts of the central government have far greater coordination problems than we experience among the federal, state and local governments in the United States. China might be thought of as a decentralized de facto federal state that lacks federal institutions that facilitate central control and coordination such as the federal court system and regional offices of central government ministries. China is best understood not so much as a Big Brother state but as a loose collection of thousands of provincial and local Party and government little brothers. Many of the provincial little brothers have only nominal allegiance to Big Brother in Beijing. Local officials want to control media not just for Beijing's purposes but also to prevent Beijing to know about their own shortcomings. Many orders and regulations from the central government are ignored from the outset or forgotten after only a few months.

One corollary of the China's shortcomings in the rule of law area is that local governments are not conscientious in obeying orders from Beijing. The result has been that the central government implements policies by national campaigns that are intense for a short time but then swiftly fade away. New regulations are issued not as amendments to old ones but as de novo regulations - apparently a tacit admission that the old ones have faded from memory. Government by political campaign as a Chinese government style is gradually fading as more laws are written down, as China's leaders keep insisting that "officials really should be carrying out their duties according to the law" and as the public learns more about the text of laws and about legal procedures. Improved public knowledge of the law is in some small part one of the benefits of the Internet for China. Although the movement away from government by campaign can be seen in that campaigns are much less disruptive than they were in the past, being aware of the "government by campaign" phenomenon can help us better understand China and the Internet.

What does this mean for the Internet? New tough rules are issued each year but are not systematically enforced. Where enforced, enforcement fades after a few months. Last Spring visiting two dozen "net cafes" in Hunan, I was never asked to produce any ID before using the computer nor was anyone else. Often regulations requiring identification of users were posted prominently on the wall. Although web bar management is supposed to check that clients are not surfing subversive websites, in practice no one pays attention to which sites net café clients are visiting. One could say that the rules were observed only in the sense that one could observe them posted prominently on the wall. Most of the clientele were in their twenties who paid about 3 RMB per hour (25 US cents) to use a computer for online chat, games watching movies (pirate copies of movies were on the café LAN) and browsing websites. The Changsha,

Hunan police estimated in Spring 2001 that there were 1000 web cafes in the city. Web cafes in China have a very fuzzy definition that can include not only web cafes but also computer gaming parlors frequented by truant high school students and underground locales that show pornographic films on their computer local area networks. The Changsha police in their spring 2001 crackdown told local newspapers that they were focusing on the pornographic web bars.

Chinese internet sites are supposed to conform to the same general guidelines as the media. See the October 2000 State Council Internet Information Management Regulations

- Threatening national security, leaking state secrets, overthrowing the government, and harming national unity;
- Harming the reputation or interests of the state;
- Fanning ethnic hatred, discrimination on the basis of nationality, and harming the unity of China's nationalities;
- Harming the state religious policy, propagandizing for evil religions or feudal superstition;
- Spreading false rumors, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, intimidation;
- Insulting or slandering someone, infringing on the legal rights of others;
- Other actions that are contrary to law or administrative regulations.

These regulations, like most Chinese regulations, are so broad that they can be interpreted many different ways. Websites are expected not to originate news - which web managers in turn interpret as meaning don't originate news that is politically sensitive. Many Chinese websites carry news gathered from the 100-plus Chinese newspapers that are online. Thus the news on the web, especially breaking news, is not much better than found in the print press. Some websites, such as Sina.com (<http://www.sina.com.cn>) allow readers to leave their own comments about a news story. Sometimes these comments are much more interesting than the news stories themselves. If a newspaper somewhere in China does print a relatively daring story, the story will often be picked up by websites throughout the country.

Bad news about corrupt local government in a province often appears in a local paper in another province since the authorities in the other province just don't care so much about suppressing bad news from other provinces. This information can then leak into the first province over the net. Indeed, local officials suppress information not just to prevent their own people from knowing about a problem but also to prevent higher authorities at the provincial or national level to know that the glowing reports they send upwards are not entirely correct.

One dramatic illustration of the power of the Internet in China came after local officials in Jiangxi Province tried to suppress news of an explosion in an elementary school fireworks factory that killed several dozen schoolchildren. Efforts by local officials to falsely claim that a mad bomber and not illegal fireworks assembly was involved was frustrated by a combination of Chinese journalists and the flow of information around China on the Internet.

Often local officials succeed in keeping information from reaching Beijing. At other times Beijing knows but pretends not to know for to reveal that it knows but can do nothing would amount to a confession of impotence. One example of how news of a local disaster spreads on the Internet despite efforts by the

local government to suppress is the report "Revealing the 'Blood Wound' of the Spread of HIV/AIDS in Henan Province" spread around China on websites and email about the HIV/AIDS disaster in Henan Province. A translation of the report is available at <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/sandt/henan-hiv.htm>

Sometimes after a big event in China or abroad, more information and commentary does leak into China over the Internet from dissident email publications such as VIP Reference (<http://www.bignews.org/>) as well as the Huaxia Digest (from <http://www.cnd.org>), the VOA's Chinese language email news service. The sending email servers of the first two email publications are blocked and so the originating server often changed. VOA Chinese email news is blocked and unblocked depending mostly upon the ups and downs of U.S. - China relations but also upon whether a politically sensitive domestic news event has occurred.

News from some foreign Chinese newspapers, including, interestingly enough, some critical reports from the Singapore Morning News (Zaobao) regularly figure prominently on Chinese news websites. The value added one sees on the web site includes reports from provincial newspapers in faraway Chinese cities that one ordinarily wouldn't see (out of town newspapers are not so easy to get hold of unless you subscribe) and the ability to do searches and compare reports over time and from many different sources. Just as with newspapers and magazines, for websites commercial pressures tend to increase the diversity and freedom of information since more attractive media is also of course more viable in a highly competitive environment.

A great variety of Chinese language books and periodicals are available online. The cost of getting online continues to fall, especially in Internet cafes where the use of a local area network brings connections costs down even lower than they are at home. Online bookstores have appeared in China, although severe problems in the areas of credit (few Chinese have credit cards); distribution and resolution of consumer complaints still severely constrain the development of online services in China. Many books, including some banned publications, are also available at minimal cost on CD-ROM as well as online. Although web content regulations apply to online forums as much as anything else on the net, the sheer volume of messages and it seems oftentimes the reluctance of monitors to cut short interesting conversations.

Although the 15 million users of the Chinese Internet are very few compared to China's 1.3 billion population, the Internet is increasingly arriving in every small town. Together with the rapid expansion of the inter-provincial highway network, the accelerated pace of countryside to city labor migration, the Internet is part of some of the most significant phenomena of the last decade - the shrinking of the distance between urban and rural China and urban China's penetration of rural life.

The Chinese government's "Government Online" project (<http://www.gov.cn>) has put thousands of Chinese government offices online. Many Chinese laws and regulations are now available online for citizens to consult and act on - already an important progress from the days just a few years ago when "confidential regulations" made it very difficult for citizens to dispute officials on points of law.

Chinese language translations of free market philosophers such as Frederich Hayek are available online on many web sites such as Issues and Ideology (<http://www.wtyzy.com>). Just as discussions in deep or lengthy Chinese academic books can be surprisingly open (perhaps the censors give up after the first 20 pages?), so too are direct contradictions of China's official political and economic ideology common on the more academic websites. Some of these articles criticize by analogy. An example is an article reprinted from the January 2002 issue of "Yellow River", Li Xianzhi's meditation on the last ten years of Lu Xun's life considers Lu's critique of one party dictatorship. This article is on the Issues and Ideology website at <http://www.wtyzy.net/linxianzhilunzhou.htm>. The analysis fits the Communist people's

democratic dictatorship perfectly but Lu Xun was talking about Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. Of course. For example, These websites regularly come under pressure, some have closed, but many very interesting ones are still out there. Forum monitors are required to delete "subversive" messages on China's many open discussion fora, including the sometimes very lively "Strong Country Forum" (<http://bbs.people.com.cn/>) run by the tongue of the Communist Party of China -- the People's Daily.

The state of the web in China reflects the uncertain state of China itself. Most Chinese, including most Communist Party members, want a more democratic and more open society. China's communist leaders fear that the development and modernization brings will help bring will shake their hold on power and lead to social instability. A Chinese provincial vice governor said a few years ago, "We are the guardians of a dead religion but must hold on for the sake of social stability." China's Internet itself, much more an emblem of modernity and progress than in the United States, will likely trace a wavering path alternating between greater opening as China moves towards greater modernization and progress and tightening at times when the Chinese leadership fears that new ideas and news that might tend to weaken the Party's control.

U.S. Embassy Beijing reports on the Internet in China are available at <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/sandt/sandtbak-hp.html#Internet%20and%20Computers>

Several translations and summaries of press clippings from Chinese news reports about the Internet are available at <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/sandt/sandsrc.htm>

A list of some of China's more interesting online bookstores and discussion websites can be found at "Beijing Bookworm" at <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/english/sandt/bjbkwrn.html>

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