The Impact of the Internet on the Political and Media Landscape in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

Although the freedom of the press is part of the PRC Constitution, in practice Chinese media have always been, and continue to be, heavily censored. This censorship, however, is under increasing challenge from the ongoing globalisation of information. These changes are epitomised by the internet, which has provided a place for dissenting voices to congregate. It is increasingly apparent that the Chinese government has (at best) an ambivalent relationship with the internet, and this challenge to its legitimacy has caused the Chinese Communist Party to re-examine its identity and how it relates both to its domestic constituents and to the outside world. In addition, the growth of the internet in China has also affected the identity of media producers and consumers, as well as challenging Western assumptions about information globalisation as a tool for transmitting democracy.

Keywords: Internet, China, censorship, identity, media, politics

Since the death of former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 China has undergone a myriad of social and political changes. Mao's 'Serve the People' became Deng Xiaoping's 'To Get Rich is Glorious' and

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the country responded with a whole-hearted embrace of the market economy. Global trade and diplomatic connections were re-established, culminating with China's ascension to the World Trade Organisation in 2001. The transition from planned to market economy (or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics') appears to have so far been relatively smooth. Politically and socially, however, the country has had to reassess its identity and its place in the world, particularly with the advent of the internet, which has allowed the Chinese people access to outside information like never before.

The global communications revolution has thrown up profound contradictions for the Chinese government, forcing it to examine how it identifies itself and how it relates not only to the Chinese people but also to the rest of the world. This article will examine three aspects in regard to the effect of the internet's rapid growth on Chinese identity: firstly, its effect on CCP legitimacy; secondly, its effect on media producers, and thirdly, how the internet's penetration into China has challenged Western assumptions about free speech and the growth of democracy.

Control and censorship of the Internet in China

In spite of China's economic opening, there are still many systems of political and social control in place, not least of which is the extensive censorship of the media. It is still relatively simple for the Chinese government to censor traditional media (television, radio and newspapers), but so-called 'new media' (the internet and all its related features) is proving much more difficult to control, mainly because of the decentralised nature of its content production. Control of television, for example, is relatively straightforward: the industry is administered by a single organisation, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television, a subsidiary of the State Council, and is also overseen by the Central Propaganda Department. Censorship occurs through both legislative (policies forbidding the broadcasting of

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certain types of material) and practical (the appointment of 'politically correct' organisational heads) means.

Internet control, however, is more complex and takes several forms: technological restrictions in the form of firewalls and blocks on certain sites; government regulation and policy, particularly for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and internet café proprietors, administered by the Ministry of Information Industries[1]; monitoring by a special internet police force under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of State Security[2]; and volunteer monitoring within organisations such as universities, where volunteers police the organisation's chat rooms and message boards and direct the discussions along 'politically correct' lines[3]. While the government promotes its internet control systems as safeguarding the moral purity of the country by filtering 'harmful' content such as pornography ('yellow pollution') and organised crime ('black pollution')[4], the true business of Internet control is concerned with politics[5]. It is particularly concerned with ensuring that the internet does not become a meeting place for independence groups, those who would seek to 'undermine national unity'[6] or challenge the authority of the state.

Ten government bodies have been identified by Lau and Chan[7] as having jurisdiction over various aspects of the internet. These are:

Ministry of Information Industries (MII);

Ministry of Culture (MOC);

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[1] Ministry of Information Industries, *Measures for Managing Internet Information Services,* Xinhua News Agency, October 1, 2000, http://www.chinaepulse.com/html/regulation.html, accessed 15 March 2007.

[2] Victor Mayer-Schoenberger, and Gernot Brodnig, *Information Power: International Affairs in the Cyber Age,* John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Faculty Research Working Papers Series, November 2001, p.23.

[3] Howard W. French, 'As Chinese Students Go Online, Little Sister is Watching,' *The New York Times,* 9 May 2006, p.3.

[4] Internet Civilisation Engineering Project (网络文明工程) 'Experiences of Colleges and Universities in Supervising the Internet (高校中对网络管理的经验),' China Culture Information Net, no date listed, http://www.ccnt.com.cn/imcpold/zhuanti_1/index_12.htm, accessed 1 May 2007.

[5] Shanti Kalathil, 'China's Dot-Communism,' in *Foreign Policy* January/February 2001, p.75.

[6] Ministry of Information Industries, *Measures for Managing Internet Information Services,* Article 15.

[7] Tau-yen Lau and Winston Chan, 'Chinese Internet Regulations,' in *The 3rd Annual Chinese Internet Research Conference.* East Lansing, Michigan, USA, 2005, http://www.com.washington.edu/mcdm/files/Reading_Presentation_Jing.ppt, accessed: 24 June 2007.

Ministry of Public Security (MPS);

State Administration of Radio, Film & Television (SARFT);

State Council Information Office (SCIO);

State Secrets Bureau (SSB);

State Administration for Industry & Commerce (SAIC);

Press and Publication Administration (PPA);

China Internet Network Information (CNNIC);

Internet Information Management Bureau (IIMB).

These government bodies regulate internet infrastructure and content through laws as diverse as the *State Secrets Law* – which has a special provision regarding the media[8] – to the *Measures for Managing Internet Information Services*, which regulates internet service providers[9], to the State Council Information Office's *Provisional Regulations on Governance of Internet-based News Providers*[10] and the counter-revolutionary crime of sedition as defined in the 1979 *PRC Criminal Law*[11].

Information globalisation as a challenge to CCP legitimacy

The advent of the Internet has fundamentally affected the Chinese government's approach to media regulation. As Fu and Cullen note:

> There is recognition [by the Chinese government] of the potential of the Internet to undermine the complex systems for controlling information flows applying to the rest of the media in China; the Internet squarely confronts the CCP preoccupation with information control[12].

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[8] 'The duplication and issuance of newspapers and periodicals, books, maps, illustrations and audiovisual products, and the manufacture and broadcast of radio programmes, television programmes and movies shall comply with the relevant provisions on protection of secrets and shall not disclose state secrets.' *State Secrets Law,* Article 20 in H.L. Fu and Richard Cullen, *Media Law in the PRC,* Hong Kong, Asia Law and Practice Publishing Ltd, 1996, p.109.

[9] Ministry of Information Industries, *Measures for Managing Internet Information Services.*

[10] Tau-yen Lau and Winston Chan, 'Chinese Internet Regulations'.

[11] H.L. Fu and Richard Cullen, *Media Law in the PRC,* p.141.

[12] Ibid, p.192.

This confrontation has forced the CCP to re-examine its position both in regard to technology and also to censorship. Its current attitude – that the internet and the plurality of ideas it represents poses a significant threat to Party legitimacy – seems to point to a government which is insecure in its mandate. As the internet begins to penetrate deeper into China, however, the government may have little choice but to embrace it.

The extent to which the Chinese government can effectively control the internet, and how this will impact upon Party legitimacy is often debated. This is closely aligned to a debate about whether the internet will foster democracy, but it focuses more on the paradox surrounding the legitimacy of the Chinese government and the role of the internet in economic growth. Nina Hachigian sums up the majority belief when she declares 'the CCP's popularity now so depends on economic growth that its leaders are safer with the internet than without it'[13]. As well as managing the internet's risks, she believes, the government needs to harness its potential[14]. Indeed, most scholars assert that attempting to completely control the internet is a futile exercise, and that the Chinese government would be much better off working with it than against it. The extensive blocking of websites – such as restrictions on Taiwan-hosted sites – is not conducive to the streamlining of both domestic and international business practices, particularly in the powerhouse cities of Shanghai and Shenzhen, where there are also extensive trade links with Taiwan. The CCP owes much of its power base to the fact that it has steered China to its current status as a major player in the global economy[15], but if the country's phenomenal growth is to continue, the role of the internet must change. To relinquish control, however, is to open up China to potential waves of dissent that could put the unity of the country at risk through independence movements in Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, and, more importantly, lead to a plurality of ideas that could eventually spell the downfall of the CCP. Such an opening would require a fundamental shift in the way the government views its own position, from 'ruling over the people' to 'ruling

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[13] Nina Hachigian 'China's Cyber Strategy,' in *Foreign Affairs* vol. 80, March/April, 2001 p.118.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

for the people', and this identity change is unlikely to occur in the near future. Thus the government finds itself in a very difficult position, and the internet in China is consequently mired in regulations and laws administered by a plethora of state bodies, each trying to control a different aspect while not being so restrictive as to inhibit commerce.

The potential of television as a propaganda device quickly became apparent during the Cultural Revolution. Since then, the government has poured considerable resources into broadcast technology and organisations such as China Central Television (CCTV) because it sees television as an effective way of reaching the masses. The internet, however, is still generally perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity. The government is gradually beginning to embrace the concept of e-government as part of its reform strategy[16], including the establishment of the www.gov.cn web portal[17]. As a rule, however, departmental websites are generally lacking in substantial information, and most of the sensitive government bureaus and ministries, such as the Ministry of State Security, have no presence on the internet. This is indicative of the unease with which the Chinese government views the internet, an unease reflected in the fact that most government actions regarding the internet involve developing various methods of control, rather than assessing how emerging technology can best be used to the government's advantage.

According to some, however, the role of the internet in Chinese politics has been greatly exaggerated. Hachigian believes that the internet will only become a destabilising force when penetration rates are much higher than at present and the country is in the throes of a major economic or political crisis[18]. Phil Deans likewise notes that internet access in post-economic reform China is very much a product of wealth and education[19] and that those who have suffered the most under economic

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[16] Jack Linchuan Qiu and Nina Hachigian, 'E-Government in China,' in Irene Hors and Jon Blondal, Paris (eds), *Governance in China*, OECD - The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development p.139.
[17] Home page of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China.
[18] Nina Hachigian, 'China's Cyber-Strategy,' p.118.
[19] Phil Deans, 'The Internet in the People's Republic of China: Censorship and Participation,' in Jason P. Abbott (ed), *The Political Economy of the Internet in Asia and the Pacific: digital divides, economic competitiveness, and security challenges*, Westport, USA, Praeger Publishers, 2004, p.123-124.

reform and are perhaps the most disaffected – the peasants, rural workers and those in traditional industries – are the least likely to access the internet[20].

Information globalisation and Chinese media producers

On the surface, the figures surrounding internet usage in China appear impressive. By 2003 there were 80 million internet users, 31 million online computers and nearly 600,000 websites hosted on servers within the country[21]. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (a government body), the number of Chinese internet users was expected to reach 200 million by the end of 2007[22]. Those Chinese with access to the internet appear to be embracing it whole-heartedly: in July 2007 Chinese actress and director Xu Jinglei was named the world's most widely-read blogger when her website logged 100 million page views[23].

When viewed on a per-capita basis, however, the penetration rate of the internet is still extremely low. In 2003 only 6.1 per cent of the Chinese population had Internet access; 60 per cent still did not have access to a landline or mobile phone[24]. This is compared to television, where, statistically at least, every Chinese family now owns a television set[25]. During the 1980s, rates of colour television ownership increased 100 times from the beginning of economic reform in 1978; in 1994 the estimated viewership was 80 per cent of the population, or around 900 million people, up from 18 million people in 1975[26]. Part of the reason for this surge in ownership was that, as China's industries began to develop, televisions sets no

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[20] Ibid, p.135.
[21] Jack Linchuan Qiu and Nina Hachigian, *E-Government in China*, p.138.
[22] *The Age, Chinese blog claims top spot*, 19 July 2007, http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/07/19/1184559939166.html, accessed: 20 July, 2007.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Jack Linchuan Qiu and Nina Hachigian, *E-Government in China*, p.138.
[25] Junhao Hong, *History of Television in China*, The Museum of Broadcast Communications, no date, http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/china/china.htm, last updated 2005, accessed 20 June 2007.
[26] Ibid.

longer had to be imported; thus the price of televisions dropped dramatically[27]. A similar pattern is beginning to emerge with the production of information technology hardware; the Chinese computer manufacturer Lenovo is now the third-largest personal computer company in the world after its takeover of IBM's Personal Computing Division in 2005[28]. Meanwhile, even the big US-based corporations have outsourced much of their manufacturing work to China. Despite of these rapidly falling prices, however, computer ownership still remains out of reach for the majority of low- to middle-income Chinese, with the cheapest Lenovo ThinkPad laptop costing nearly 6,000 yuan[29] ($A890), while an average salary is around 1,000 yuan ($A148) per month. Internet cafes, by contrast, are a much cheaper way of accessing the internet (usually costing around 1-3 yuan per hour) – hence their phenomenal popularity in China – but they are also much easier for the government to censor.

When examining the internet, its actual classification as a medium can be problematic. This article is based on the idea of the internet as media, or more specifically, 'new media'. Viewing it in this way – as a more sophisticated, interactive extension of traditional forms of broadcast media – invites comparisons with the development of traditional media. Daniel Lynch, however, argues that the internet is actually a form of telecommunications, and as such is more closely related to fax and telephony than to the traditional mass media[30]. In addition, the definition of this new media is fluid, which further complicates the issue. Even Lynch concedes that '…Telecommunications are rapidly merging with the mass media in nature and function – most obviously in the form of the Internet'[31], a phenomenon that he describes as a 'technology-driven blurring of the traditional distinctions between

[27] Ibid.
[28] Lenovo, *About Lenovo - Company History*, no date, http://www-07.ibm.com/lenovoinfo/about/au/history.html, accessed 24 August 2007.
[29] Lenovo China , *Products - ThinkPad* (ThinkPad 笔记本电脑), no date, http://www-900.ibm.com/lenovoinfo/cn/thinkpad/index.html, accessed: 24 August 2007.
[30] Daniel C. Lynch, 'The Nature and Consequences of China's Unique Pattern of Telecommunications Development,' in Chin-Chuan Lee (ed) *Power, Money, and Media : Communication patterns and bureaucratic control in cultural China*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2000, p.179.
[31] Ibid. pp.180-181.

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telecommunications and the mass media'[32]. Most other scholars also seem content with the definition of the internet as a new form of interactive mass media. This, of course, has implications for how it can be expected to operate, both in a political economy and sociological sense[33], and also how the Chinese government can be expected to react to it. Certainly the internet has followed the path of the traditional media in that, firstly, it is now heavily driven by advertising, and secondly, it is a tool both for information-gathering and entertainment. The internet certainly has more interactive elements than the traditional media, but it can be argued that this is merely a natural extension of the old-style consumer feedback channels (eg. letters to the editor pages in newspapers, and talkback radio) available in the traditional media. For these reasons it seems more appropriate to classify the internet as a form of media rather than telecommunications; while it began as a telecommunications tool in its broadest sense, it now fulfils many of the same functions as the traditional broadcast media, albeit in a more open and sophisticated fashion.

Although this debate may seem purely academic in nature, these definitions fundamentally affect the way the internet is managed in China. Traditionally the internet has been viewed as a form of telecommunications, rather than a form of media; this has meant that it is not overseen by the party's CPD which distributes Party propaganda to all mass media outlets[34]. This distinction has implications for the implementation of censorship and the distribution of propaganda on the internet by the CCP. Indeed, when discussing the question of censorship, Williams and Rich group the internet and broadcast media together, as both derive from similar technologies, declaring that:

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[32] Ibid.
[33] See Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2002, and Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.
[34] Daniel C. Lynch, *The Nature and Consequences of China's Unique Pattern of Telecommunications Development*, p.186.

> New battle lines are being drawn for control of the Internet and the airwaves, but the speed of transmission and the volume of information flashing its way round the world means that this is a much more difficult line to hold.[35]

There is much debate over whether, given the interactive and globalised nature of the medium, it is physically possible to censor the internet in any meaningful way. Furthermore, as the internet develops, the boundaries between the traditional media and the so-called new media will begin to break down. In Australia, for example, every major newspaper has its own website which publishes content online, more and more television shows are being repeated on the internet, and radio stations such as the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation stream simultaneously online. New media is blurring the lines between previously discrete sections of the media, which will pose a unique challenge for the Chinese government in terms of policy and regulation. Even in countries such as Australia and the United States, which have highly advanced legal systems and do not face the same developmental challenges as China, legislation has difficulty keeping pace with the rapid development of the internet. It seems inevitable that, even though the internet currently does not reach a very high proportion of the Chinese population, the way it develops in the future will profoundly influence the Chinese government's approach to media regulation and control.

This shift has also had a fundamental effect on the identity of media producers and consumers. Television stations, for example, have a finite number of staff with particular responsibilities in specific, accessible locations, and it is relatively easy to keep track of who produces what, and to punish those who overstep the mark. The internet, by contrast, thrives on anonymity. Users seldom use their real names, and personal details such as gender, age and location are often left undisclosed. When coupled with the international nature of the internet, this makes locating and punishing offending users much more difficult. In addition, websites that deal with sensitive material are often hosted outside China, and frequently

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[35] Louise Williams, 'Censorship,' in Louise Williams and Roland Rich (eds.), *Losing Control: freedom of the press in Asia* Canberra, Asia Pacific Press, 2000, p.4-5.

employ so-called 'sparrow tactics', hopping from one web address to another every few months, or setting up mirror sites that publish the same content from a different online location.

In addition to censorship, there is the issue of content sourcing. Television news organisations such as CCTV are restricted by laws as to the make-up of their content and its source. Today, all television stations in China fall under the dual jurisdiction of SARFT and the CPD. The CPD reports to the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee.[36] There are also propaganda departments at provincial, municipal and local levels, which collectively control content, set media policies and issue operational directives[37]. Before economic reform began in 1978, news bulletins solely broadcast Party propaganda; in recent years, however, restrictions have begun to be lifted and CCTV, for example, now receives carefully-selected foreign news via satellite[38]. As well as being subject to regulation by the CPD and SARFT, television broadcasts in China are, as previously discussed, also governed by national laws regarding sedition, defamation, state secrets, pornography and copyright[39], though some of these, particularly those regarding sedition and state secrets, are notoriously vague. Restrictions on content, particularly on the importation of foreign content, were eased in the 1970s; before this there was a blanket ban on the broadcast of foreign content[40]. Many stations now source their entertainment content from overseas, subtitling or dubbing it into Chinese. On 10 September 2006, however, the official Xinhua News Agency announced new controls on the distribution of footage by foreign news agencies such as Reuters or the Associated Press[41]. These restrictions are designed to control the type of material sourced by domestic news broadcasters from foreign wire services. Foreign news

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[36] The Politburo of the CCP is made up of around 20 high-ranking members of the Party who almost always also hold high-ranking positions within the State. The Politburo is the second-highest level of the Party; the highest level is the Standing Committee of the Politburo, made up of 5-9 members which include the leadership of the Communist Party.

[37] Junhao Hong, *History of Television in China*.

[38] Ibid.

[39] H.L. Fu and Richard Cullen, *Media Law in the PRC*, p.77-78.

[40] Junhao Hong, 'History of Television in China'.

[41] Associated Press, 'China Tightens Media Control,' in *CBS News*, 10 September 2006, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/10/world/main1990718.shtml, accessed 24 August 2007.

agencies are now forced to distribute their content solely through Xinhua or its affiliates; they are not permitted to 'directly solicit subscription of their news and information services in China'[42]. It is unclear, however, just how effective such forms of censorship actually are, particularly as the main access point for foreign news in China is now the internet.

The internet faces no such restrictions on sourcing; so-called 'citizen journalists' are able to report events and write their own commentary on blogs while uploading pictures and video taken with mobile phones. In addition, there is the growing phenomenon of media diversification, where television shows are available for download and radio stations stream over the internet. This poses a considerable problem for censors because it is difficult to determine where the traditional media ends and 'new' media begins, and thus which laws apply.

In contrast to television, the internet appears to first have called on technological methods of control, and it is only recently that more human intervention is taking place. Yet in spite of the nation-wide firewall, keyword blockers (which deny access to websites containing certain words such as 'Falungong', 'Tiananmen Square', 'Taiwan/Tibet independence' or 'East Turkistan'[43]) and other technological systems of control, the hacker culture which is prevalent on the internet means that it remains relatively easy for the computer-savvy user to bypass these control mechanisms. It is possible to negate the keyword filters by wording enquiries or comments so that they do not contain any banned words, but leave the commentary unchanged. For example, in a forum on a Chinese Protestant website[44] discussing the question 'Can CCP members be Christians?'[45], the acronym 'GCD' was used to refer to the Party instead of the usual 'CCP' to avoid alerting the censors to the sensitive nature of the discussion. GCD comes from the Pinyin romanisation *gongchandang* (共产党), which means 'Communist Party' in

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[42] Ibid.

[43] The name of the independent state for which the Uyghur minority of China's western Xinjiang province are fighting.

[44] http://www.zanmei.net/bbs/viewthread.php?action=printable&tid=66410, accessed 3 August 2007.

[45] Currently prospective Party members must declare themselves atheists before they can be inducted into the Party.

Chinese, whereas the official term, CCP, is an English acronym (Chinese Communist Party).

For this reason, the Chinese government appears to be moving more towards human-based methods of control, such as the employment tens of thousands of internet police – published figures vary from 30,000[46] to 50,000[47] – and a small army of volunteers from organisations such as universities, whose task is to monitor chat rooms for subversive content. According to one news report, Shanghai Normal University alone employs 500 such volunteers from among its students[48]. These volunteers are part of a campaign, launched in 2006, 'Let the Winds of a Civilised Internet Blow,' which is itself part of a greater 'social morality' campaign[49] known as the 'Eight Honours and Disgraces'[50]. The 'Civilised Internet' campaign also involves asking internet service providers and other companies to purge their servers of offensive content, which can range from pornography to politically subversive material[51]. There is an oft-perpetuated stereotype that young people are more liberal than their parents and, in the case of China, it is assumed that this generation of so-called 'technological natives' will be the one to challenge current CCP rule. However, what is now being seen with the 'Civilised Internet' volunteer campaign, particularly in universities, is a group of young people actively participating in the censorship system even as some of their peers attempt to undermine it. This challenges the assumptions often made about the identity of Chinese internet users, particularly regarding their political leanings, and shows that the internet has not necessarily led to a pro-democracy shift in identity and personal politics.

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[46] Sholto Macpherson, 'World War 3.0,' *The Diplomat*, Sept/Oct 2007, p.33.
[47] Howard W. French, 'As Chinese Students Go Online, Little Sister is Watching,' p.3.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Such 'social morality' campaigns have a long history as a form of governance in China, such as Mao's infamous 'Hundred Flowers' campaign of 1956-7 and of course the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution soon after.
[50] Howard W. French, 'As Chinese Students Go Online, Little Sister is Watching,' p.3.
[51] Ibid.

The effect of information globalisation on Western beliefs about democracy

It is impossible to conduct research into media control in China without encountering the debate about the relationship between the mass media and democratisation, a debate often blinded by ethnocentrism. It also contains a certain measure of historical conflation, as some writers are inclined, either consciously or unconsciously, to equate the development of the media and internet in China with development in the West. The internet, however, is so fluid that its influence will be markedly different depending on place, time, political system, cultural circumstances and other factors such as particular countries' levels of development, a fact often overlooked by Western scholars.

Interestingly, there appear to be few scholars who believe that the development of an increasingly free press in China will necessarily go hand-in-hand with democratisation. This is in stark contrast to the majority of Western media sources, who seem unwilling or unable to challenge such a basic assumption. In particular, it appears that journalists and other non-academic writers who discuss China without ethnographic experience tend to believe that the opening up of the country to capitalism, as well as the internet, will naturally lead to the development of democracy (or at least that this should be the ultimate goal)[52]. On the surface, this appears to be a logical conclusion. Many scholars, however, tend to take the opposite view: capitalism and even the internet have very little influence on the development of democracy[53]. Lynch sums up the predominant view when he declares:

> ...specifically in the case of China, more liberal and open communication flows will not necessarily lead to democratisation. They will, however, make it significantly more difficult for the state to sustain authoritarian rule.[54]

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[52] See Mary-Anne Toy, 'Passport Blog: Dissent in China,' *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, 24 May 2007, http://blogs.smh.com.au/passport/archives/2007/05/dissent_in_chin.html, last updated 24 May 2007, accessed, 24 May 2007 and Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, 'China Loses Grip on Internet,' *BBC News*, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2027120.stm, last updated 5 June 2002, accessed 16 March 2007.

[53] For an extensive discussion on the likelihood of democratisation in China see Suisheng Zhao (ed.) *Debating Political Reform in China*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

[54] Daniel C. Lynch, 'The Nature and Consequences of China's Unique Pattern of Telecommunications Development,' p.202.

The assertion that the Internet, and, indeed other forms of media reform, will not naturally lead to democracy is echoed by many scholars. Zhao Yuezhi argues that the real aim of media reformers (in reference to the traditional broadcast media, and television in particular) is, in keeping with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, to develop market-driven commercialisation, rather than democratisation, though she does concede that developing media organisations as businesses should ideally lead to more autonomous editorial policies[55]. It is important to note that Zhao's theory claims that money, not free speech, is the driving force behind media reform. This is significant because it mirrors the development of other industries in China since the 1980s, and indeed it reflects the Party's idea of 'market socialism' or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Zhao also points out an important assumption often inherent in Western-based sources, that the Western model of market-driven media is the ideal to which China should aspire.[56] This assumption is one that often goes unquestioned by foreign scholars when discussing censorship of the Chinese media, but as Zhao notes, a mass media driven entirely by market pressures is not necessarily any more democratic than one controlled by the state. She claims that institutional pressures mean that the Western media 'act more like lap dogs than watchdogs,' and that, 'the operation of advertising logic in the free market has acted historically as a powerful and effective form of political censorship'[57]. She goes on to declare that, 'It is clear that press freedom resting on the market is not sufficient for a fully democratic system of communication'[58]. This is once again in keeping with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which asserts that propaganda is just as prevalent in democracies as authoritarian states, but driven by market pressures rather than political ones[59]. In making such an argument, however, Zhao does not appear to take

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[55] Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the party line and the bottom line*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, p.181.
[56] Ibid, p.182.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid, p.183.
[59] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, p.xi.

into account issues such as the detention and persecution of journalists, which Paris-based NGO Reporters Without Borders lists as a criterion in its checklist of press freedom, and which obviously has a serious impact in the development of a culture of self-censorship. But leaving such issues aside and instead approaching from the view of ideological pluralism, Zhao's theory – that a country like Australia (where both the mass media and the country's most popular internet sites are dominated by a few major corporate players and one beleaguered public broadcaster) faces similar challenges in terms of censorship as China – does have some merit, and poses an effective challenge to an assumption that is often overlooked by Western academics.

Lynch is likewise highly critical of those who see the relationship between authoritarianism and democracy as a linear one, where authoritarian governments naturally evolve into liberal democracies [60]. Indeed, he condemns such a view as 'an insidious, unanalysed assumption [which is] behind the vast bulk of development-communication literature, as well as behind the "common knowledge" conveyed in newspapers'[61]. Nevertheless, the view that Lynch critiques continues to pervade not only popular and scholarly opinion in the West but also foreign policy. The exportation of democracy is still viewed as a noble cause and is often used as justification for military and other incursions by Western powers.

It is important to note that these scholars are not arguing that the reign of the CCP will stand unchallenged in the face of the internet. Rather, as Phil Deans notes, such a challenge is more likely to come in a nationalist rather than a democratic guise, and it is these extreme nationalists, rather than critics of a liberal democratic bent, that so concern the Chinese censors[62]. Many ethnocentric, Western-based secondary sources, however, choose to overlook this and instead highlight China's fledgling democracy movement, a trend particularly prevalent in Western newspapers[63]. There seems to be an overall consensus that the globalisation of

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[60] Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, politics, and "thought work" in reformed China*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1999, p.4.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Phil Deans, 'The Internet in the People's Republic of China: Censorship and Participation,' p.130.
[63] See Mary-Anne Toy, 'Passport Blog: Dissent in China' and Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, 'China Loses Grip on Internet'.

information – embodied by the internet – will cause (and is already causing) a shift in the way both the Chinese government and the Chinese people see themselves, as well as in the way they relate to each other and the outside world. The final outcome of this metamorphosis of identity, however, remains a matter of speculation.

At first glance, the obvious conclusion is that the internet is the medium most likely to encourage freedom of speech in China. This is often reflected in Western media reports that tout the internet as the ultimate democratising force while overlooking the traditional media as a mere puppet of the government. The reality, however, appears to be quite different. The television penetration rate (cable, satellite and free-to-air) in China is extremely high, while internet access is still generally restricted to the wealthier, better-educated sectors of the population, often located along the prosperous east coast[64]. There is an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor; peasants and workers in traditional industries have suffered the most under economic reform as the 'iron rice-bowl' welfare system has been eroded. While Deans identifies this sector as the most likely to rise up against the government, they are also the least likely to have internet access[65]. Chinese politics no longer revolves around the proletariat, and those who have profited significantly from the system that has emerged under economic reform are far less likely to wish to overthrow it than those who have been disenfranchised by it. Therefore, it can be argued that television and other traditional media are far more important influences than the internet as they have direct penetration into a wider range of people's homes[66]. The general consensus among scholars is that the internet is unlikely to bring democracy to China, though it may challenge the Party's rule. What, then, does this mean for Western perceptions of the internet as an inherently democratising force?

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[64] Phil Deans, 'The Internet in the People's Republic of China: Censorship and Participation,' pp.123-124.
[65] Ibid, p.135.
[66] H.L. Fu and Richard Cullen, *Media Law in the PRC*, p.78.

It is a popular assertion in the West that the very nature of the internet means that it cannot be censored or controlled in the way that the traditional media can[67] and therefore it is more conducive to democracy. One of the major differences between traditional media such as television and the internet is that television is a *service*, while the internet is a *community*. In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson wrote of the nation but could just as easily have written of the internet:

> It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion[68].

Guobin Yang contends that 'the Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation'[69]. This is often extrapolated into the idea that all citizen (as opposed to government) users of the internet naturally have democratic leanings and are embracing the internet as a means of participating in civil society when other avenues – such as the right to protest – are closed to them. The fact that Chinese authorities are beginning to turn towards grassroots methods of internet control (with segments of society willingly complicit) shows that this is a myth that also needs testing. Chinese dissidents have adapted their activities and relations to the globalised nature of the internet, but the ongoing development of new forms of censorship shows that the Chinese government has also had to undergo a rapid change of thinking in order to deal with the Internet.

For a long time the West has been able to turn a blind eye to China's treatment of dissidents, except in some high-profile cases such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. China's Internet restrictions, however, now present a challenge to Western ethics as multinational corporations seek to open business operations in the PRC. For example, in November 2004, Shi Tao, a reporter and

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[67] Victor Mayer-Schoenberger, and Gernot Brodnig, *Information Power: International Affairs in the Cyber Age*, p.21-22.
[68] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983 (1991), p.6 .
[69] Guobin Yang, 'The Co-Evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 43 no.(3) 2003, p.406.

editor for the Chinese newspaper *Contemporary Business News*, was detained for allegedly revealing state secrets. He was later formally arrested and in April 2005 was sentenced to ten years in prison. Yahoo China provided information that the authorities used to link Shi's email account with an internet posting detailing the alleged breach of state secrets, which played a significant role in the prosecution of the case against him[70].

A similar conundrum is thrown up by the apparent willingness of major internet corporations such as Yahoo and Google to acquiesce to Chinese government demands and restrict what their users can access; the lure of admission to such an extensive emerging market tends to override ethical standards. Similar to the case above, Google has developed a self-censoring version of its search engine, google.cn[71], which enables the Chinese government to block the uncensored US version while still allowing Google access to the market. This cooperation between foreign internet companies and the Chinese government is extremely contentious and has major implications for the freedom of speech debate: namely, to what extent are Western corporations, which were developed in a climate of democracy and free speech, honour-bound to uphold those values in markets such as China? In January 2007, Google co-founder Sergey Brin admitted that the company had compromised its ethical principles and its motto, 'Don't be evil,' by censoring its Chinese version, and that 'on a business level, that decision to censor...was a net negative'[72].

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[70] CMP Techweb, 'Yahoo Testimony About Imprisoned Reporter Contradicted,' 30 July 2007, http://www.informationweek.com/showArticle.jhtml;jsessionid=TOOXJWAHQJ5OSQSNDLPSKHSC JUNN2JVN?articleID=201201833, accessed 10 August 2007.
[71] For an empirical comparison between the google.com and google.cn search engines see Louise Merrington, *How the Chinese Government Controls Television and the Internet, and its Implications for the Development of Democracy in China: A Comparative Analysis* (honours dissertation), available through the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, 2007.
[72] Jane Martinson, 'Chinese Censorship Damaged Us, Google Founders Admit' *The Guardian*, 27 January 2007, http://business.guardian.co.uk/davos2007/story/0,,1999994,00.html, accessed: 20 September 2007.

Conclusion

The Chinese government's reluctance to embrace the advantages of the internet points to an administration that feels increasingly under siege from developing technology. There are several factors that contribute to this. First, the imperial nature of the Chinese political system renders it relatively unstable. The Chinese model of government is very similar to that of the great nineteenth-century empires, with a central ruler (or rulers) presiding over a disparate group of ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse subjects, in what Ross Terrill calls the 'Great Systemic Whole: a political and moral monolith that occupies all philosophic space'[73]. The greatest fear of the Chinese government is that, with secessionist movements and general unrest brewing in the border territories of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, and of course the ever-present Taiwan issue, the Chinese empire will soon go the same way as its nineteenth-century cousins. The weakening of the Party's ideological base that has occurred since the 1980s has also made its hold on power even more tenuous.

The traditional Communist ideology that characterised the Mao years has now been replaced with a philosophy best summed up by Deng Xiaoping's famous 1984 quote: 'To get rich is glorious.' The Party now seems to be moving towards a mindset akin to that of the Singaporean government: providing the populace with a relatively high standard of living disarms the impetus for political change. It is at this point, however, that the Chinese government finds itself conflicted over the internet. As global financial players embrace e-commerce, the government is torn between instinctive political self-preservation, which aims to reduce the impact of the internet as much as possible, and the need to open up Chinese access to the worldwide network in order to maximise commercial interactions.

The way the Party evolves to cope with technological change will ultimately define its future. As well as political factors, however, the fact that the upper echelons of the Chinese leadership are characterised by – to be blunt – old men (at

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[73] Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2003, p.4.

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64, President Hu Jintao is considered relatively young) who are not natural technophiles will further hamper the Party's adaptation.

Whether the CCP mindset that sees the internet as a threat is justified remains to be seen. As previously mentioned, there is a general consensus among scholars that the internet will pose some kind of challenge to the rule of the Communist Party, but such a challenge will also be influenced by other factors such as economic development and the domestic and international political environment. The internet in China is still very much in the early phases of development, though its trajectory has many similarities to that taken by television, most notably a period of growth fuelled by the production of domestically-produced, relatively cheap hardware. Without strong government backing, however, the internet's growth will likely be slower than that of television. Whether this will constitute a permanent impediment to nation-wide penetration remains to be seen.

It is generally agreed that, for the present, television and other forms of traditional media remain largely the mouthpiece of the CCP. The common Western perception that the internet will foster democracy in China, however, is for the most part dismissed by scholars. It remains highly likely that the internet will be the medium of choice for movements wishing to challenge CCP rule, as it is easier to access, from a production point of view, and more difficult to censor. That such movements will be pro-democracy is by no means certain. In some respects the CCP is justified in feeling threatened by the development of the internet, but ultimately increased censorship is not the answer; more restrictions will only encourage users to find new ways around them. Change is inevitable and often swift, and if the Chinese government wishes to stave off potential challenges to its authority, it will have to seriously rethink the way it manages the internet.

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