

Internet and the Fragmented Political Community

Research >
China

Taking an optimistic view of the 'unlimited potential' of the role of the internet with regard to political changes, many political analysts, journalists, and politicians in the Western hemisphere assume that the internet offers the perfect tool for an increasingly sophisticated political discourse aimed at overthrowing the political system in authoritarian states, and that this process can only be slowed down by political control and harsh censorship (Chase/Mulvenon 2002:xi/xii). This view is, however, based on a very narrow concept of the structure of the internet, which survives from an early period in which internet use was restricted to an academic elite.

By Jens Damm

Ten years ago, Howard Rheingold (1993) described the internet as the perfect tool for a young and free netizen community. Focusing on the critical user able to publish at will and at negligible cost, he saw cyberspace as a home for 'virtual communities'. In this home, interested citizens could meet in chat rooms and BBS-newsgroups to form new and long-lasting relationships, thus defying the physical borders of the real world. The World Wide Web, email-lists, and newsgroups were seen as a space where, despite various control and censorship measures taken by governments, vast amounts of background information were offered with the aim of creating well-informed critical netizens. Lessig (1999:4) expressed this vision as follows: 'The space promised a kind of society that real space could never allow – freedom without anarchy, control without government, consensus without power. ... The claim now was that government could not regulate cyberspace, that cyberspace was essentially and unavoidably free.'

This utopian vision does not account for two significant issues: first, the process which transformed the internet into a profit-oriented business media, and second, the massive expansion of the internet worldwide, which made it much less a 'toy' for the highly educated academic US West Coast elite, and more an everyday media such as radio and TV. This very process also led to the trivialization and de-elitization, and thus depoliticization, of the internet.

Another important point concerns the technical and administrative structure of the Net, which has been described by Lessig (1999:6) as 'code'. The code of the internet is comparable with the law in society: the internet, the software, and the rules are created by various groups such as state organs, individuals, and companies. The code represents the combination and interaction of the software, hardware, and rules and etiquette of the internet. The structure of the code derives, therefore, from the power struggles between different groups. To quote Lessig (1999:6) 'We can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental, or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear.[...] Code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us'.

A more detailed analysis of some basic features of the internet in China reveals that the internet in China is not an ideal tool for establishing political discourses and political change, as certain structural features, such as the code underlying the internet, can preclude meaningful discourse.

It is not so much the increasing polit-

'One person starts surfing the net and the whole family gets healthier'. This Chinese approach towards the Internet was found in a billboard advertisement campaign in Beijing by the pharmaceutical company, Sanjiu.



ical control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state organs, as frequently stated in Western publications, but rather the specific global development of the Net itself, and the larger societal and political developments in China that are shaping China's internet. Thus, the internet has become a heterogeneous medium, with only a small and fragmented political community, where the lack of a general open public sphere hinders communication between different groups. The underlying reasons for this are not only the specific code of the internet, but general developments in China, which by various means discourage open controversial political discourses, although these discourses do exist today within various intellectual circles.

The user

First of all, it is unlikely that the vast majority of Chinese internet users are critical of the current regime: the average user is young, highly educated (more than 75 per cent have a senior high school degree or higher), belongs to the new urban middle class, and is without any doubt the beneficiary of the economic and, to some degree, political reforms which gained pace after Deng Xiaoping's historical southern trip (*nansun*) in 1992. Approximately 30 per cent of the population of the booming big cities such as Beijing or Shanghai is online, but the figure drops to about 2 per cent for the population of the poorer eastern provinces according to the latest figures, published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2004. These users have a highly pragmatic approach towards the government and the CCP. In their view political discourse aimed at overthrowing the current regime would probably lead to political instability (i.e. chaos or *luan*) and they there-

fore support the regime's efforts to establish the internet as part of a modern economy and society and to control 'sensitive issues'. For these users, the internet offers a variety of usage options, obtaining information an important one among these, as stated in the CNNIC reports. Political discussions are restricted to very specific topics to avoid conflict with the broader taboo topics as laid down by the Chinese government, but these users have on occasion played an essential role in political and societal discussions involving, for example, cases of corruption, and crimes such as murder and rape on a university campus.

Postmodern society

There is a second reason to believe that the internet is unlikely to bring about rapid political change: the current use of the internet in China is congruent with the broad societal, political, and cultural transformations that have shaped China in the last decade. The Chinese middle class, which makes up the most important group of internet users, is part of a postmodern society, with a strong interest in personalized and individualized lifestyles. This group is now much less politicized than it was in the 1980s, when the reforms had just taken off. The current Chinese internet fits the picture of the apoliticized society that WANG Jing (1996:2-3) described: 'It is much more difficult [now] for mainland Chinese citizens to conclude which historical course would better empower the masses politically, culturally and materially'.

Chinese citizens could not choose between an elitist cultural agenda and an economic one, which would include 'the perpetuation of Chinese socialism (no matter how ideologically corrupt it turns out to be) as a challenge and alternative to Western liberalism.' The sec-

ond way, which was not chosen by the Chinese but forced on them from above, was nevertheless gradually accepted by the majority of the people including many intellectuals, probably because it resulted in their improved economic status and increased personal freedom.

The picture, however, is not so different in the West, where Cass Sunstein (2001) has referred to the isolation and emergence of narrow interest groups that preclude active social and political engagement in a postmodern society. He explored the risks posed by virtual worlds in his book, *Republic.com*, coining the term 'Daily Me' to denote the way in which technology could lead to a self-centred and selfish existence.

As in the West, most Chinese BBSs (and chat rooms) offered by the big portals such as Sohu or Netease are divided into very detailed personal interest groups. Formerly taboo topics such as homosexuality can now be openly discussed in various forums and groups, but in accordance with global trends, no real communication takes place here between different groups; on the contrary, users with similar views meet to reaffirm their own opinions, prejudices, and positions (Sunstein 2001:51-88). Most Chinese users access the BBS and chat rooms offered by the big portals such as Sohu or Netease. The choice of interest groups is limited for users, and there is, in particular, an absence of politically oriented groups. One well-known exception is *Qiangguo luntan* ('Strong Nation Forum') offered by Renminwang ('Peoples' Daily Online'), where controversial political discussions take place. Nevertheless, the name, 'Strong Nation Forum', provides an obvious clue as to the topics of discussion; not surprisingly, patriotic and nationalistic statements abound here, and where there is criticism of the CCP or the government then this is usually for being 'too soft' with regard to US or Taiwan policies.

The code of the Net

Thirdly, the above-mentioned 'code' determines the roles that the internet can play: in China the internet is heavily influenced by governmental agencies and ministries (for example, the Ministry of Information Industry) as well as by national and international companies (for example, the most important web portals Sohu, Netease, and Sina). The common objective of all these organizations is to turn the internet into a tool for specific applications, such as technological modernization, education, and commerce. The user in such a model is regarded as a consumer; not as a highly motivated, politicized, and critical citizen. In China, the internet was not developed within independent academic circles, but by various government agencies and, often quarrelling, ministries. These ministries set incentives and provided the

basic infrastructure, but all other details were then dealt with by the domestic and international business community.

Western political scientists are still very interested in the ways the internet is used to spread subversive information, but they seldom deal with the question of whether Chinese users consider this information to be trustworthy, and little attention is given to the fact that in a postmodern, consumer-oriented society such as China, highly sophisticated chat rooms and web pages (multimedia) are in vogue (see, for example, Chase/Mulvenon 2002). The user's attention is drawn to the latest fashion, the latest vogue in brand names, and the latest gossip. With the onslaught of commercialization, the web increasingly resembles a virtual version of Tokyo's Ginza district, and a brief survey of the topics on offer within the best-known Chinese chat rooms provided by Sohu or Netease shows that the user is attracted not by politics, but by the personal interest groups which have resulted from today's fragmented lifestyles.*

The internet may have an important role as a catalyst for the spreading of actual information, but in times of crisis the general usage patterns may change. For the time being, however, the internet has only a limited influence on emerging political discourses in China and has much more importance as a tool for lifestyle communications with a very personalized use. In addition, there is an increased use of the internet by the general population, which is also leading to the depoliticization of the Net, since even today the political discourses in China are largely restricted to intellectual circles. <

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Dr Jens Damm is a research associate at the Institute for East Asian Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests include new communication technologies, identity politics, and gender studies in Chinese societies.
jensdamm@gmx.net

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* Ginza, Tokyo's most famous shopping district, has become a synonym for a highly commercialized culture.