THE BLOGOSPHERE IN CHINA:
HOW BLOGS REFLECT AND ACT AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

by

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ABSTRACT

The present Chinese government maintains a monopoly on information distribution in order to control the flow of information to the populace. With the growing urban population and advent of electronic communications technologies, communications between citizens without government control or interference is facilitated. Although the Chinese government still seems to keep a firm hand on dissent, with the growing popularity of blogs and other forms of electronic communications, information can now spread very quickly. People can now access both commentary and opinion, allowing them to know what their countrymen are thinking, and to domestic and international news. The promulgation of blogs within China will; enable more discussion of both societal issues and significant events by Chinese people within China; facilitate societal and political progress, and perhaps spur governmental change; allow outsiders to engage and understand what the Chinese themselves are saying.

Keywords: China; censorship; blogs; internet; blogosphere; control; blogging

Subject Terms: Internet – social aspects – China; Internet – China; blogs – social aspects; censorship; Internet – access control – China; civil rights – China; Internet – censorship – China

DEDICATION

For FJ,

and YJ.

Without a doubt to AD.

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1: INTRODUCTION

Everything about China is big world news at the moment. The nation's political, social, economic, and environmental issues all affect the world in some way. Since 1949, China has been governed by socialist doctrine and previous to reforms begun in 1978; the Communist Party was the sole source of direction for the nation (Ferdinand, 1996). However, as Chinese society increasingly becomes open and exposed to new ideas, the power of the Chinese Communist Party declines (Ferdinand, 1996).

People were formerly prohibited from moving to a new locale, but now can change their jobs, move to new cities, and circumvent such policies as the one child policy (Ferdinand, 1996). Previously the Party spoke and everyone heard the same message, making control of the populace by the central government relatively uncomplicated. The purpose of keeping the people uninformed, or misinformed, would have been to render them compliant, and this probably stifled the possibilities of the spread of dissent.

Now, a shift seems to be underway from putting society's needs first to allowing individuals to put their own values first. With the growing urban population, communications between citizens without the interference of government control is facilitated by technological tools, such as the internet. The internet is also facilitating this process: as central power over the population declines, influence over society as a whole also declines. Although the central

government still seems to keep a firm hand on dissenters, now, with the advent of blogs, information can surely spread very quickly, but people will have access to both commentary and opinion so they will know what their countrymen are thinking, and to news about China and foreign countries. The promulgation of blogs within China will, first, enable more discussion of both social issues and significant events by Chinese people within China, and second, facilitate social and political reforms, and perhaps spur governmental change towards greater transparency and accountability.

Why is it important to examine English-language blogs based in China? The multiple filters of government and media often lose the voices of individuals who are living in China. Given the important position China holds in the world as a growing economic and political power, it is important to hear those voices and understand what they are trying to tell us. Simply by blogging, each person with access to the internet can have a potential audience of millions. Stories will be told, communities are formed, and justice can be sought. Fundamentally blogs are only an extension of the human need to communicate, but what is revolutionary about blogs is how greatly they provide the ability to communicate on a global level with a mass audience.

This paper will examine the place of blogs in communications in China, and the attempts of the Chinese government to block or at least interfere with both their content and dissemination. This research paper will also discus how the content of blogs can present a challenge to the political and social order in China, and be a catalyst for social change in China. For the purposes of this

paper, China-based English blogs that are expository or written as a form of protest are the most important. Not only do these blogs provide an insight into the current situation in China without the filter of the government or media, writers are able to directly communicate with the reader and initiate a conversation and community where each person can contribute. The implications for China are obvious. That citizens might be able to bypass official channels for news, in a country where the media is often a government mouthpiece, is a worrisome thought for Chinese officials.

2: STATISTICS ON INTERNET USE IN CHINA

According to Drezner and Farrell (2008), the number of blogs in the world in 1999 was estimated to be just 50; by 2004, this number was estimated to be as high as 4.1 million, with the majority in English. How many internet users does China have? The estimated number of blog writers in July 2007 was 19.1% of internet users in China, which represents 30.94 million persons" (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007, p. 40). Significantly, internet users rely on the internet in general as their major source of information, in addition, the "[m]ain information channels for a user who earns more than RMB 2,000 per month, [and who is aged] between 25~40, with education level above junior college" was the internet (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007, p. 40). The estimated number of those in this group of all internet users was 89.2% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007, p. 40). In addition, the cost of internet access seems low enough, even by Chinese income standards, for a large part of the population to be able to afford the fees. In June 2007, this average monthly cost was about 75 yuan per month, about ten American dollars (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007, p. 34). The percentage of people living in urban areas is now 40%, according to one blogger (Confidential Reporter, 2008). According to the CIA World Factbook (2008), about 200 million rural labourers have moved to urban areas to find jobs. Many of these will add to the numbers of current internet users, and will also seek new and better sources of information,

and regardless of whether the information they seek is in English or Chinese, they will be exposed to a greater divergence of information than they were previously exposed to.

Alexandri (2007) reports a 33% increase in new Chinese internet users year over year, with a total in September 2007 of 172 million users. She conjectures that this increase started during the 2003 SARS episode and was related to a lack of reliable information on the disease (2007). She speculates that Chinese people, in response to "a period of increased surveillance and restriction of internet activity", have been more eager to go online to discover the reasons for the pressure on the press (Alexandri, 2007). This is unlikely, though, since a government shutdown of websites would not encourage users to sign up for internet accounts and search for the forbidden information. Instead, it is more plausible that people would be exploiting the internet for whatever information it can offer and is not related to any crackdown.

The number of internet users could indicate that consumers are already used to reading things online and blogs are but an extension of this concept. Penetration of internet access in Asia as a whole is 15.3% compared with 21.9% for the world as a whole (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008). However, that percentage may seem small, but it represents 210 million Chinese (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008). Internet users are more likely to trust online sources such as blogs for news if they have already developed an attitude of trust toward the internet- based content. While in China, according to Deborah Fallows, Chinese netizen's trust of internet content remains low, there is a group of "elite"

and influential bloggers who push the limits of the internet in China (Fallows,

2008, p. 2).

3: THE BLOGOSPHERE – A COLLECTION OF LINKED BLOGS OF SIMILAR INTERESTS

The term blog is a short form of weblog, a periodically updated journal that offers online commentary with minimal or no external editing by any authority figure. A blog is most often presented as a series of reverse chronologically-ordered individual entries of news or commentary (Drezner and Farrell, 2007, p. 5). One definition of what a weblog is, as described in a survey reported by MacKinnon:

"A 'blog' or 'weblog' for the purposes of this survey is a form of easy online publishing. It is a kind of website, written by an individual or small group of individuals, usually in reverse-chronological order, regularly updated. The majority of blogs in the world right now are written by individuals who are not compensated for their writing, and who do not obtain permission from any authority or organization before publishing their own materials to the web" (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 9).

The content of a blog closely resembles a diary in that it is a written record of an individual's experiences, observations, and thoughts. However, a blog goes beyond these purposes; a diary is commonly known to be not for general consumption, while a blog goes beyond its affect of immediacy to envelop the reader in its intimate thoughts. Blogging, moreover, is the blog writer's personal take on a situation, one that can then be commented upon, argued over, or

disputed with less fear of government censure or hostility than one might find if the article were printed in the newspaper.

Most significantly, these entries, which are termed posts, can include hyperlinks to other sites which enable the blog commentators to become part of an infinitely large conversation encompassing all of the World Wide Web.

The blog contents reflect the writers' attitudes and capabilities for analysis and story-telling. The better writers, hence the better blogs, will have clearly developed ideas and are succinctly written. Not so good blogs – or blogs of a different style – might have stream of consciousness style writing that eventually leads nowhere. The most read are those that are well-written, and thus have well-developed ideas in their entries. The writers are experts in certain fields and can make statements of fact and may link to other blogs or websites for support, while other times they are re-reporting what others have written and have added their own comments, points of view, or what they've heard, into the mix. This reflects the great flexibility of blogs, to take and give out information in any form and in a wide spectrum of factuality. This is also a dangerous part of blogs, that an articulate writer could be a marginally politically and socially acceptable person, and write anything: "the holocaust never happened"; "the Japanese invasion of Asia was a good thing". One could be amazed at how history is selectively remembered.

Often these blogs cover or repeat what mass western or Chinese media is reporting, but with their own commentaries. This allows blogs to act as a collation point for news and ideas. A blog entry from China may include snippets of

various English-language media as well as those from within China, with the addition of the bloggers own commentary and comments posted by readers.

Blog content can exist on many levels. In both the west and in China, most blogs are personal, describing daily goings-on, pet tricks, gossip about friends and celebrities, and comments about work or school. The primary users of blogs are young people who like to post their stories of "teenage angst" (Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p. 1). However, blogs are more and more a medium for publishing personal opinions on international relations, and are becoming so significant that they could influence those with corporate or political power. The power of blogs might extend to attracting the attentions of the conventional media and influence their reporting and story coverage.

Blogging has grown so quickly because it is dissimilar to other media. A traditional website contains posts that may or may not be updated on a regular basis. Blogs feature this as well, but readers can post their own comments and thereby engage in an ongoing discussion. Their replies may support or contest the original post, or ask for clarification. Readers can add their won viewpoints or correct errors. As such, blogs can be seen as more democratic than the traditional media may be. The traditional media have few entry points for those who may dissent from an expressed opinion. Blogs are open and could be considered democratic.

3.1 Blogging For Academic Purposes

Could scholastic institutions also undergo a change in the way they both operate and are perceived by the public? Current academic understanding does accept blogs in the reality of English-language scientific research reporting in China. Davidson (2005) reviewed the transformational evolution in the provision of information, particularly that from the scientific, technological, and medical journals, as coming forward from print sources to the more current internet-enabled electronic resources (p. 25). This faster distribution of information that has been properly considered and peer reviewed can be both advantageous and dangerous.

As Davidson states, this shift in means and speed of acquisition of material is "driven in part by the growth of the internet and the tremendous explosion in the amount of information now available to everybody, is creating fundamental changes in institutions such as publishers, libraries, and universities that primarily exist for the creation, management, and distribution of information and knowledge" (2005, p. 25). This change from print-based exchange to electronic exchange of information could be characterized as a paradigm shift, since the facilitation of access to information also facilitates the development of knowledge. Researchers do not act alone; their work, even if carried out alone in terms of physical location, relies on personal communications and peer review to ensure the quality and integrity of scientific research (Davidson, 2005, p. 25). Their work depends on the development of community within their ranks.

What else changes in the world of scientific research with the use of electronic means? The expectations of the public who seek scientific information, as well as those of other scientists, undergo a transformation. As Davidson notes, "both groups [will demand] ever more rapid, open, and global access to scientific information than has been available in the past" (2005, p. 30). This challenges the concept of intellectual property and who owns and controls it (Davidson, 2005, p. 29). The scientific process depends on the current methods of communications, and the relative rapidity in dissemination of information could mean less scrutiny is paid to experimental results before they are accepted as knowledge (Davidson, 2005, p. 25).

3.2 Corporate Uses Of Blogs

Many journalists interviewed for a study by Euro RSCG Magnet and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism (2007), 68% of them, consider that blogs will become a corporate marketing tool for companies that want to educate their customers about their mission or products (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 28). One may conjecture that journalists are more aware of mainstream uses of blogs, such as corporate marketing, and less aware of personal blogs. This may show the application of personal bias since they feel they cannot trust such blogs as sources of news. These journalists may be protective of their profession as well, and tend to disregard a challenge to their own work (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 28).

However, an opening does exist in China's communications as elsewhere for corporations to monitor blogs and counter claims made within the companies' purview. Bloggers can be seen as more trustworthy than are journalists because of a perception of corporate interference in reporting. Ordinary citizens are unlikely to post favourable reporting when a company has acted with malfeasance. A corporation could reach consumers directly, as well as take advantage of the speed of transmission of a blog post, to reach journalists (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 29).

A parallel can be found here between corporate use of blogs and private postings of news and comment. A corporation can react very quickly during a threat to its integrity, while private blog writers can bypass their former reliance on journalists and the media to disseminate reliable information.

3.3 Political Content And Commentary In Chinese Blogs

Chinese government surveillance and censorship of blog and other internet content urges the character of the Chinese blogosphere in directions different from those in the west.

Beeson et al. describe how blogging is a form of communications, not a discipline, and therefore any internet user with a minimum understanding of internet access can write and post a blog (Beeson, 2005). The authors also point out that political blogging is a major part of the content of blogs, similar to letters to the editor in newspapers. Political bloggers are largely absent from the

Chinese internet in favour of those personal blogs about social life (MacKinnon, 2008). In fact, the Chinese blogs with major readerships are likely written by, or perhaps ghost written for, "cultural celebrities and prominent entrepreneurs" (Lu Qiu, 2006).

This does not mean that political commentary is completely missing, though. English-language bloggers in China are usually careful to avoid expressing plainly-worded political opinion. Instead, they employ connotative writing that hints at rather than delineates their real point (Esarey, 2008). While it may be in the best interests of communications that censorship would not occur, this value may be at odds with the directions of the Chinese government, and perhaps with the directions of Chinese society.

On the blog, Imagethief, a comment left by "Me", summarizes what may the purpose of Chinese government interference with blogs and other internet content: "Misinformation, disinformation, restriction of participation etc, all with the express purpose of convincing the public of lies that directly effect [sic] their freedoms" (Me, 2008).

Zhang, in her abstract, finds that the Chinese government has "shifted the media policymaking process from the Party to government operation" (Zhang, 2006). This policy has benefited the economy, and has implications for internet controls as well. Zhang further postulates that the central government "has relaxed in its ideological claims, yet still wants to control online content" (Zhang, 2006). This too suggests implications for the continuation of relatively lax

controls, as compared with strict media controls of the past. That is, blogs and other content are being watched, but with less emphasis on political correctness.

3.4 Bridge Blogs: A Significant Tool For Communication In China

China's blogosphere may have a characteristic that is more fully developed than it may be in the west. "Bridge blogs", a term defined in 2004, describes a developing segment of bloggers whose postings are intended to create a link from the bloggers' country to foreign readers. They can possibly circumvent government internet watchers through the use of coded phrases and weak references to political affairs. One such bridge blog concerned with China affairs is that by a media researcher who is based in Hong Kong, Roland Soong (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 7). His blog is called EastSouthWestNorth, and is also known by its acronym *ESWN*.

Soong's bridge blogs have attracted attention in the west. His site was getting 8,000 visitors per day by the end of 2005, and Western media have written about him (Mitchell, 2005). His aim is to provide non-Chinese speakers with synopses of information from the Chinese language media that may be of relevance or interest. Soong states he wishes first to fill in the gaps left by slim coverage of Chinese affairs, second to deliver information to non-Chinese readers more speedily than the Western media have, and third to supply a more diverse and complex viewpoint (Soong, 2006). Another benefit of such a bridge blog is a more Chinese-centric perspective than the Western media would. Foreign media necessarily filter news through their own social, cultural, and

political perspectives, and bridge blogs can supplement these views with closer-to-home content. The citing by Soong of many writers from the Chinese media supplies many angles of reporting, rather than what may be reported in the major media.

In the case of the Chinese media, often more in-depth and balanced reporting will be found in blogs due to censorship of the conventional, mass media. Some blogs will have their own original coverage giving different insights into something mass-media may have missed or approach with different angles or with more balance than others do. In addition, a China-based blog can act like an on-the-spot reporter with a report unfiltered except by the eyewitness's personal characteristics and biases (Drezner and Farrell, 2007). While speed of reporting can provide a welcome advantage in providing information, it can also act against accuracy since no or little time exists for fact checking. However, blogs can be quickly corrected by the poster, or contradicted by others (Drezner and Farrell, 2007).

4: SOCIAL IMPACTS OF BLOGGING

An alternative use of bridge blogs is to report on what the major media cover. One current issue in China is a new freedom to access of information law introduced in May of 2008 (the National Ordinance on Openness of Government Information, or *xinxi gongkai tiaoli* (政府信息公开条例) (Bandurski, 2008). Bandurski notes, in blogging the China Media Project blog, that "Chinese media have been using the ordinance to push the topic of information openness as well as related issues like freedom of expression" (Bandurski, 2008). The value of this blog is that it could overcome any government propagandizing about official opening of society. One person who has tried to receive information about a water project has been given various stonewalling responses: "the answer to the wrong question, the information does not exist, and it is inconvenient to provide the information you ask" (Bandurski, 2008).

Another blogger on the same issue speculates that such discussion in blogs does not necessarily attempt to directly sway public opinion, but instead presents an alternative viewpoint. Banurski states, "Why should it be Yan's responsibility to help you "make up your mind" about whether Yang is guilty? His point […] is that there are sufficient public doubts about the fairness of proceedings to merit a change of venue" (Bandurski, 2008).

Officialdom can also blog in response to demands for social change. Chen Jibing writing in the China Youth Daily, a newspaper representing the youth wing

of the Chinese Communist Party, urges moderation in demands for social change. While he postulates that public opinion can represent the ideas of the general populace, he cautions that only government experts know how to fix problems. Chen seems to be using coded language in discussing other bloggers: "Those who hold the second viewpoint [in a discussion on the ways to s social change] are represented by current affairs commentators who are popular with readers and therefore they tend to believe that the majority opinion is always correct. These people are then imbued with a strong sense of moral superiority and they believe that they are speaking for the interests of the majority of the people" (Chen, 2008). While his exhortations are for Chinese bloggers, this belief that bloggers may become a catalyst for change, indirectly inferred since he is calling for moderation on their part, show that Chinese bloggers may eventually develop a similar mindset as their western counterparts – in that they believe grassroots movements can have a meaningful effect on their society.

Chen comments that the right to both complain about social conditions and also to suggest ways to improve social ills are not the usual purview of the common citizen. He charges that those who suggest the means of reform are acting selfishly (Chen, 2008). This conforms to what the China Youth Daily stands for: "it actively advocates the new thoughts and concepts that are conforming to the socialist market economy" (Brief Introduction of China Youth Daily). In other words, as long as a citizen complains about minor discomforts, and demands no relief, his complaints can be ignored.

However, officialdom can still put its heavy hand on such a blogger. One such blogger was a policeman, Wu Youming. Wu wrote letters to local and national politicians on behalf of the people in his area to publicize their troubles, such as evictions from old homes that were to be demolished. Wu was dismissed from his duties because, as he has put it, "under the current system, people who dare to speak the truth must be prepared to pay the price" (Kennedy, 2007).

Why are weblogs so significant in their influence? Certainly, they provide ready, immediate access to the authors' usually private experiences and thoughts. However, blogs specify names and identify events and thereby create a source and array of information that can be spread, evaluated, added to, and developed more. This information is unpredictable in its scope, theme, and development.

Since Davidson wrote in 2004, weblogs have become a prominent entity. Their immediacy in provision of and accessibility to content ensures that they are sources of influential, although possibly unconsidered, material. A weblog owner and writer whose popularity has been derived from a public perception of trustworthiness and utility can give them a widely-felt impact. Industry and governmental leaders cannot ignore the impact of weblogs, since criticism, whether or not justified, can appear and spread quickly due to the internet-based means of communication, as Davidson has noted (Davidson, 2005, p. 30). This gives bloggers enormous influence over public access to information and the formation of collective opinion.

4.1 Foreign Journalist Use Of Blogs As Information Sources

The information, news, and opinions contained in both English and Chinese blogs represent a convenient source for readers. They do not have to search far in a time consuming process of finding what they want. Drezner and Farrell point out that this is good for individuals, firstly, but the media within China and in foreign countries also peruse blogs for nonofficial opinions on issues, especially those of a political nature. A third benefit is that those who hold political power can read the newspapers for a taste of what the populace thinks, due to the reporters use of blog content (Drezner and Farrell, 2007).

Those who have studied communications theory know that the form of delivery of information influences the way the story is received, and thereby creates a certain reality. This reality is an intended effect of the message sender. Blogs are not unique in this. However, the influence of blogs from China goes beyond their readers; they also affect the content of international media coverage (Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p. 1). In fact, the influence of blogs is more significant than their size would indicate. Drezner and Farrell consider that blogs will gain both importance and credence since "the blogosphere functions as a rare combination of distributed expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news, and public-opinion barometer" (Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p. 1). Given that blogs are not attached to a significant media outlet, they do emerge as trustworthy collectors of information, and their analysis can be taken as worthwhile. Some may even be advanced enough in content and analysis that

they are relied upon for predictions of political developments (Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p. 1).

An intrinsic problem with blogs is that they can lack credibility. The implications for blog writers are clear, if their blogs are to be taken as reliable sources for others. Blogs must develop a solid base on which to judge trustworthiness in general. This trust is based on an evaluation of credibility, motivation, and accuracy of the writer and his or the sources. A few bloggers have gained more credibility and are trusted to be gatherers of significant information and analysis, and media organizations use their work to follow developments in society and politics (Drezner and Farrell, 2004).

Credibility of news sources is usually dependent on the integrity of the reporters. Recent scandals in American news reporting have illustrated how this lack of trust can develop (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 23). Trusted sources of information outside the government's control – negating censorship's influences – remember that some bloggers have more credibility due to their links and postings – a wider range of sources enables more credibility Both North American and international correspondents had low levels of trust of cable news and local publications. However, international journalists tend to rely on non-independent corporate sources as being credible (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 25). If this can be extrapolated to the case of China, where the state controls much of media content as shown here, then the weblogs may present an alternative to the corporate media within China.

Where do reporters gather their ideas? It could be from weblogs. Weblogs are generally written by those who have experienced some event first hand, or are the originators of grievances, and therefore can represent a significant amount of the sources of public opinion. Journalism professor Todd Gitlin has postulated that the media imagine reality as being based on "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). Blogs can supply the material that media personnel who hold this perceived view of the world.

However, a study by Euro RSCG Magnet and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism found that journalists rely on blogs for their sources to a minuscule degree (Euro RSCG Magnet with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2005, p. 27). Few international journalists, as low as one to nine per cent of the total, use them for any purposes. The Chinese experience seems to differ from the international one, and another study reports that as much as 90% of journalists surveyed use blogs as a search tool and information source for their work (MacKinnon, 2007). In fact, blogs ranked fairly high as useful sources for journalists working in China, at about middle in a range of sources. The study also found that "certain English-language "bridge blogs" have become very influential with China correspondents" (MacKinnon, 2007). However, many of those surveyed stated that blogs in general were not reliable, but that the work of certain bloggers could be acceptable (MacKinnon, 2007).

Those who blog from within China encompass several groups: journalists who may or may not use their real names; academics who wish to discuss their work, or make it better known; educators who use blogs as a means to develop and share curricula through discussions with colleagues; and government officials who seek to communicate with their area residents (MacKinnon, 2008). The blogs seem to provide an easy, fast means of communication which can also circumvent official channels. Chinese reporters are disallowed from working for foreign news organizations. Therefore all journalists reporting for foreign media organizations are foreign. The problem is that since many of these journalists cannot read Chinese, they must rely on Chinese nationals, who are governed by restrictive government rules, to provide translations (MacKinnon, 2007). Many stories cannot be told by Chinese reporters, so the work of the foreign journalists is more difficult. This is the importance of the advent of the weblog, which provides access to the thoughts of ordinary Chinese. Those blogs written in Chinese are still accessible as there are many English-language bloggers in China who have a working understanding of Chinese and there are also a number of Chinese blogger who write in English.

4.2 Chinese Bloggers Who Are Based Outside China

Other bloggers who wish to write about China's politics do so from bases outside the country. This group includes those who have been arrested or detained, or whose family members have met similar fates. They use blogs to publicize what they have experienced and to seek support for justice. One example of this is a blog written by Zeng Jinyan, who became a human rights

activist after her husband Hu Jia, an activist on HIV-AIDS issues, was detained in early 2006. Another example is the blog of Nina Wu, sister of filmmaker Wu Hao who was detained for over five months without charge.

As Chen puts it, "the channels of expression for "public opinion" have been rapidly growing and expanding" while moves toward political reform have been lagging (Chen, 2008). One of his complaints is that blog-based criticism is aimed at both the private and public spheres. He feels that bloggers should seek only public domain reform, and not "interfere in private matters about which it has no right to interfere with" (Chen, 2008). However, as noted previously, he also feels that the ordinary person is not qualified to express opinions. While there should be an implicit understanding of norms among bloggers in regards to rules of decorum in order to prevent libellous outrages writings, an active and critical blogosphere is the better alternative to a censored and shuttered internet that is constantly looking over the proverbial shoulder in self-censorship.

4.3 Overview Of Media Censorship In China

Why is the Chinese state controlling the media? Often, this is a narrow outlook aimed at keeping the citizenry uninformed and thus docile and controlled. China's state-run media are censored for the reasons of obedience and control. However, technological advances have superseded the ability of the state to exert complete control over media and content. Certainly, this has been achieved with the cell phone and the camera phone which can send pictures but blogging gets the message out to many more people than would just the receiver of the cell phone call. The phenomenon has a precedent. Chinese internet

chatrooms were critical of the government's actions during a dispute with the USA in 2001. Foreign journalists monitored discussions and after verifying information independently, published stories based on the chatroom material (MacKinnon, 2007).

The bridge blog by the China Media Project reveals to Western eyes some surprising insights into the level of open discussion in the Chinese media about demands for reform. While the mission statement of the China Media Project is to track media change in China, this is done through blogs about reports on such change in the Chinese media. One example is about a man in Shanghai who allegedly has stabbed six police officers to death in July 2008 (Bandurski, 2008). We in the West have long held the view that the Chinese media have been unable or unwilling to provide believable coverage of events. This view has been reinforced through media reports on such major events as the Tiananmen Square incident of June 1989.

This blog, in contrast, states "the critical question concerns information, transparency and accountability. The public wants answers. What did police do to make Yang so angry? Why can't Yang be allowed to publicly state the reasons for his actions? What are the police hiding?" The blogger directly challenges the integrity of the Shanghai and Jiangsu police in asking, if there is no open trial, and we have only the accusers saying his person was not violated, how can the public be reassured?" (Bandurski, 2008). A Shenyang blogger responded, "If the case against Yang Jia is so ironclad then why don't they dare be open about it?" (Bandurski, 2008). This sort of questioning is what people in the West may take

to be an element of a democratic society, as opposed to the perceived obfuscation of other regimes. However, the mainstream media in the West seem seldom to report on such challenges to the Chinese government.

Fallows, writing in The Atlantic magazine, quotes Yang Xiaokun, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva as stating, "In China, we don't have software blocking internet sites. Sometimes we have trouble accessing them. But that's a different problem. I know that some colleagues listen to the BBC in their offices from the Webcast. And I've heard people say that the BBC is not available in China or that it's blocked. I'm sure I don't know why people say this kind of thing. We do not have restrictions at all" (Cutler, 2008). However, the proof is in the experience of many journalists and bloggers.

Of course, restrictions exist in China, just as they do in the United States. As long ago as 2003, researchers found that internet sites were blocked in response to site content, although this was not consistently so. Sites would be blocked and then unblocked as content changed (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003). The current daily media reports detail what reporters are finding in China during their Olympic coverage: Journalists in Beijing have complained that many internet sites have been blocked in the Olympic press centre, including sites discussing Amnesty International, the Tibetan situation, dissident groups, and the 1989 Tiananmen incident. BOCOG, which is the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, has admitted that certain sites have been blocked, but that

these sites have nothing to do with the Olympic Games (IOC members reportedly enraged over China internet block, 2008).

China is not the only nation whose government spies on internet usage. The American government has requested records from such companies as Google, ostensibly "to estimate how pervasive pornography is on the internet" (Bray, 2006). However, personal data is attached to searches and could be used by the American government for other purposes. The overriding significance for any society is explicated by Princeton jurisprudence Professor Robert George: "culture and law are inextricably entwined: The law might follow the lead of cultural movement and vice versa. A law, no matter how neutral it might seem, informs behaviour" (Offman, 2008). How Chinese authorities continue to monitor and control the internet and how internet users react to this will depend on the invasiveness of the government. Despite having a huge number of internet users, the internet in China is still developing and policies enacted now will have a major impact on how bloggers will operate in the future.

5: EXAMPLES OF BLOGS INSPIRING OFFICIAL ACTION

A Chinese blogger may not be able to inform his or her audience of a world-wide discussion about some happening within China. Likewise, Chinese internet users may not learn about an international discussion on an environmental problem such as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam (Fallows, 2008). China has its own internet search engine based in China, Baidu. This means that search enquiries are handled speedily since the data does not have to cross international boundaries. China has something characterized as the Great Firewall filter system which search for certain words that make the government nervous (Cutler, 2008). This slows down queries to Google, even Google.cn, for which the servers are outside the country. The difference is that Baidu does its own in-house censorship, while Google must undergo a search by the government software (Cutler, 2008). But what happens in society in general, not just on the internet, when a person conducts an internet search or blogs about a forbidden subject?

5.1 Tibet And The Olympic Torch Relay Protests

O'Brien's blog "Beijing Newspeak" discusses the efforts the government went to, to discredit the foreign media and foreign governments. According to O'Brien, Chinese back home were upset by the disruptions of the Paris leg of the Beijing Olympic torch relay caused by Tibetan separatists (O'Brien, 2008). Then, the government-controlled news agency Xinhua discussed the torch relay

protests in Europe. The writer points out what happens when the government tries to micro-manage events and spread of news in the face of blogs and other uses of the internet. Apparently, according to the writer, things turned worse instead of better for China when the government tried to exploit the news about the attacks on the torch relay. The aim was to discredit the Dalai Lama and his followers as inciters of violence. Ironically, due to the Xinhua reports, Chinese became angry at all Tibetans (O'Brien, 2008).

The directive from the government also reflects how the government will have to change to counter blog-writers' postings. It called for more speed in responding in print to bad news from home or abroad. It read: "Newspaper editors and television producers should produce reports more quickly. They should stick to the official line to better make China's case to the world or, more importantly, domestic viewers" (O'Brien, 2008).

O'Brien has also blogged about a priority of the government, of "inciting patriotism and hatred of the Dalai clique". To do this, the government media representatives just had to exploit the news of the riots in Tibetan ethnic areas around China. Significantly, another government directive gave room to state media editors to improvise suitable responses to the actions in Tibet (O'Brien, 2008). While bloggers are not to be found in any central locale, and thus are hard to control and censor, this directive also implicitly gave away some power to censor news to make the government look better to local editors (O'Brien, 2008). Such reports, coupled with the reports from Paris, easily whipped up nationalistic emotions in China.

5.2 Attitudes Toward Foreigners

Again, ironically, the government spread the original propaganda that whipped up people's passions against foreigners, and those passions got out of control. The government censors had to move in and delete many web postings that railed against foreigners in general. That is, the government instead of having to either attack anti-communist government material or to incite something against foreigners for the attacks, had to calm down feelings against foreigners. The anti-foreigner postings spread through blogs and cell phone text messages very quickly (O'Brien, 2008).

Magnier points out in his report reflecting the content of blogs coming from China that the government encouraged the xenophobia which drove the anti-Carrefour protests (Magnier, 2008). The government did nothing at first, he cites, to stop the blogs and text messages. Now, he conjectures, the government realizes that the protests went beyond what it had wanted, and has asked the media editors to report on more positive actions. The blogs such as O'Brien's have maintained a constant issue of commentary on these conflicting forces. He quotes a government official as writing: "Those disrupting the torch relay in Paris did not stand for the whole French people […] as the Olympic host, Chinese first show their friendliness to win those holding bias against the country" (O'Brien, 2008). This all reflects how fragmented and difficult to control blogging will make the government's job to control the citizens' passions. O'Brien details how the censorship edicts are issued. The "Internet Inspection Sector" tells internet service providers to "reset the keywords used to block access to certain

websites, relay the instructions through all internet distribution channels and then delete the notice in a timely manner" (O'Brien, 2008). After the protests grew away from the control of the government, it was able to neither cancel nor prevent the biggest protests against Carrefour, the French department store (O'Brien, 2008). However, news, opinion, and blogs about Carrefour were blocked from Sohu.com within a week (O'Brien, 2008). The point is that the Chinese government depends heavily on the strong nationalistic feelings of the people to maintain its power, and these strong feelings have been fostered by the government.

Another example of an English-language blog stirring Chinese netizens to fury is the blog Sex and Shanghai. In this blog, the blogger challenges many of the taboo subjects in China that tend to rile nationalistic netizens. Topics such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang; areas that have strong independence movements, criticisms of the Chinese government, and his sexual escapades with Chinese women have garnered this blog strong reaction from netizens as well as a public call from an academic to expose and evict the writer from China, describing the blogger as "foreign filth" (Soong, 2008). Much of this anger is due to the perceived discrimination and slights against China's "honour," with many recalling China's weakness during the late 19th and early 20th century against foreign powers.

5.3 Sichuan Earthquake

A major shift has occurred with reporting of the recent Sichuan earthquake. Access to officials and to information were both freely provided. The

government realized that controlling rumours which could undermine confidence in the government could be best carried out by releasing complete, honest information. Fallows appropriately called this the "Sichuan spring" (Fallows, 2008). Fallows also reports that the domestic Chinese press is once again under tighter control now that the major part of the earthquake relief effort has passed (Fallows, 2008). Currently the "Sichuan spring" appears to have been short-lived as recent media reports tell of protesters being harassed and detained as the "heroic" period of the earthquake rescue has now led to embarrassing questions being asked of faulty construction and official incompetence and corruption (Wong, 2008).

Once the propaganda purposes of an open media no longer fulfilled the requirements of the government in rallying Chinese citizens to its own cause, a clampdown was very quickly initiated.

5.4 Falun Gong And Tiananmen Square

Access to information that could undermine the central government's control over the population can be made inconvenient, or almost impossible if a crisis has occurred. Fallows and others have reported that prohibited search terms include "Tiananmen Square", and "Falun Gong" (Fallows, 2008). If one types in the search engine, Tiananmen Square, one gets tourist information from an official website. If one adds "massacre", the links show up but they cannot be loaded; instead, the search brings up a page that says "not connected". Once such a search has been conducted, the censor software will disable Google search for awhile; perhaps for about 10 to 15 minutes afterwards, Google will not

load. This clearly serves as a warning that has more import than an official reprimand of some sort would.

While the government has control over content in general, this control extends to throttling access to various sites. The system has an official name, the "Golden Shield Project" (Fallows, 2008). China's relatively few fibre optic nodes for processing and passing on information packets create bottlenecks which slow down passing data so that it can be examined, and if necessary, measures can be applied to increase the inconvenience of using the internet. This works especially well for foreign sites, including foreign blogs (Fallows, 2008). Software blocks have been implemented to frustrate users who attempt to access certain undesirable sites.

5.5 Blogs As A Check

Blogs often act as a locus for collating the vast information that can be found on the internet. Often, bloggers will compare information found on other blogs and a variety of news outlets to create their understanding of events, or simply to highlight points-of-view that fit the particular blogger's thinking. Blogs have the ability to be used as a check – they can help readers better understand an issue or highlight inconsistencies in news reporting or official government statements.

In a China context, news orientated blogs will often carry a better analysis than what is offered by Chinese news agencies. News agencies in China are constrained by censorship laws and government directives on what is

permissible or not. Blogs, especially those that are not based on Chinese servers, can provide an alternative point of view that is proscribed in China.

The Imagethief blog highlights an example of the more insidious type of censorship, the type which leaves the viewer believing they have just seen an objective debate in which the participants were able to freely express their opinions. In the post "A western journalist reflects on his complicity in Chinese propaganda (Moss, 2007)", Mure Dickie, a reporter for the Financial Times, describes how seamlessly his appearance on Chinese television was edited:

"…local media look much freer than they really are – in part because of the role dupes such as me play in creating a false impression of genuine debate. No one watching Reform Dialogue could have known that my real views never got past the editing room (Dickie, 2007)."

Another post in the Imagethief blog provides a prime example of collating information from separate views then providing an analysis. In his "Tibet and the trouble with unassailable national myths" entry, public relations expert William Moss, links reports from a variety of mainstream western media outlets and contrasts their reports and analysis with that of Chinese media outlets (Moss, 2008). He also provides links to reporter's blogs and writes his own commentary on what the news outlets are saying, as well as his own analysis. In this one post, a reader has the resources to evaluate both western and Chinese sources, and to read the commentary of an expert blogger.

6: WEBLOGS IN CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Nicholas Carr points out that the introduction of the printing press in the 15th century gave rise to the fears of Italian humanist Hieronimo Squarciafico that "easy access to books would lead to intellectual laziness, making men 'less studious' and weakening their minds" (Carr, 2008). Carr is right in postulating that "deep reading […] is indistinguishable from deep thinking, and that technology can affect how "the neural circuitry of our brains" is wired to think. He argues that the form of perusing we do on the internet can reduce "our capacity for concentration, reflection, and contemplation" (Carr, 2008). Carr also points out that many in the 15th century also thought the advent of the printing press would lead to the undermining of religious authority, among other social ills. So, can we surmise that such an evolutionary step in the way the environment can affect our thinking can certainly be a step backward? People seem to have survived and adapted to the influences of the forms of books on our minds.

While a leaky firewall for postings such as blogs that originate internally in a country may seem inefficient, the leakiness of the internet censorship structure actually reflects larger Chinese society. A total proscription of undesirable and forbidden content may be impossible, so the government has implemented a system that makes access uneven. Sometimes hotmail or yahoo are available, and the next day not. Possibly a temporary blackout is inflicted on those who

search for sensitive material (Cutler, 2008). Prohibited words are added to and removed from lists, and apparently the lists are changed often (Cutler, 2008). This keeps citizens on their toes, much like in the days of the street committees when people could be summoned for purported offences. In other words, the central government is keeping its ear on the citizens' communications, and uses unpredictability as the enforcement tool. The unpredictability of what might be the forbidden terms on any day means the user has no idea what the system is searching for, and therefore he or she must be careful always, and broadly. Thus, this is control of both communications and of society through proxy (Cutler, 2008). Apparently, a search outside China can be made so frustrating that a user may simply look for information within China.

This applies to Chinese bloggers as well. They can write blogs within China and post them there, or post them on an international server. However, their intended Chinese audience may not have the patience or knowledge to be able to search outside China. Fallows sums this up: "being inside China means operating under the sweeping rules that govern all forms of media here: guidance from the authorities; the threat of financial ruin or time in jail; the unavoidable self-censorship as the cost of defiance sinks in" (Fallows, 2008). Many blogs present opportunities to compare conditions of some sector or other in China to a similar sector in another country. The press usually carries out this function of reflection and criticism, but the press in China is also controlled by proxy (Cutler, 2008). The publishers seem to understand what they can print that will not draw unwanted attention from the government censors.

As can be seen, China, and Chinese citizens, are becoming technologically advanced, not only making computers and cell phones and the like but using them for their intended purposes despite government restrictions; consistently interfering with the use of all this technology is difficult, and completely halting, or terminating it, is not possible; China, though still Communist ruled, has embraced the capitalist economic system and wants to be on a par and compete with western countries in terms of GDP and output in terms of international trade. Seemingly the government wants it both ways, a communist party ruled society with the benefits of capitalism. However, stopping the influx of foreign ideals on human rights, as the western political leaders insist must happen, is too late, since western influences have infiltrated Chinese society to a great extent.

China has long controlled its population through management of information. Previously the Chinese government has been the sole source of information in the communications system for Chinese society. This single source acted as an entity of social influence. Perhaps the controls on internet content are merely a reflection of long standing policy being updated to match new technology. Currently, the sole internet function that can circumvent this throttling of societal change could be the weblog. It appears quickly and is quoted by other, well-regarded bloggers, giving it credence as well as speed. For English-language bloggers in China, they are able to quickly collate and disseminate information that would take much longer is going through a news agency.

6.1 What Do These Blogs Tell Us About China-Specific Issues?

Is all that blogs entail beneficial in terms of Chinese society? Open commons, found in all cultures and societies, are where verbal intercourse took place, where ideas developed, and significantly where social proscriptions were enforced. The shift to the on screen information age has started to replace the tactility of the open space. They are also where demonstrations were held for the government to see, not just for the private citizen to participate in (Manthorpe, 2008). Blogs, as noted previously, can be written immediately after an event. They can appear faster than government censors can make access to content difficult or impossible. However, bloggers may not be able to disseminate what they know, due to the various government controls. Blogs are fulfilling this old role of enabling public discourse but in a new way and new forum.

This paper has shown how and why blogs are useful to Chinese and foreign news correspondents, but as weblogs are a comparatively recent development, more research is needed on the relationship between blogs and the spread of reliable news around China to delineate the effects. Will the government be comfortable adapting to the new paradigm of electronic-based communications, one with many sources and a discontinuity in thought? The government control over thought and action will surely come second to the means of the new communications systems and their messages.

Will blogs and other internet-based communications functions give Chinese citizens leverage over their government? Will the blogs, which usually follow one topic, but which are admittedly fractured, piecemeal in making and

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maintaining logical connections, and varying greatly in form and substance, spur us into a new way of deep, considered thought? As Carr states, reason not faith, will be the primary factor in making way for innovative means of participating in public discourse. First, we had oral discussion, then solitary reading followed by various avenues of debate, and now, once again, shared building of ideas, but through electronic means. If so, blogs will, in my view, encourage a moving ahead of human rights in China. However, the evolution of these rights will come from the people's prerogative, not through legislated change from above, or pressure from abroad. In conclusion, the growing popularity of weblogs coupled with changing technology will ensure that blogs will overwhelm the Chinese government's ability to control their content and prevent social change not adherent to their own policies and agenda.

The many blogs could represent fragmentations of what we could consider as normal intellectual thought processes. The Chinese people are showing that they do not think with one mind through the diverse opinions expressed and facts reported through blogs. Surely the Chinese Communist Party-dominated concept of one way of thought for all will fall before the onslaught of blog content. For those who have been disenfranchised from their ability to seek justice and recourse, blogs can be a public appeal, an avenue for protest, and for the reader, a tool to understand. Injustices occur on a daily basis throughout the world, but until such an incident affects an individual, often the reaction is confined only to the circle of those who are in distress.

Who will end up being the motivating force in Chinese society, those who write blogs and other internet-based communications, or the central government? While the internet can be a way for ordinary Chinese to share ideas, discuss concepts, and develop paradigms, will significant societal change occur as a result? It seems that for the near future, the Chinese Communist Party will continue its hold on political power and keep China a one-party state. The rulers in Beijing, though, should be smart enough to realize that a one-party rule does not equate to a totalitarian state. The internet itself, in most likelihood will not bring down the current regime in China, but it is very likely that any changes will very closely involve the internet as a means of communication for organizing, spreading information, and a gathering place for like-minded people.

The government attempts to manage the internet by allowing dissent to air where the government deems it useful, and continuing to reign tightly in areas considered sensitive or insecure, there will be a façade of openness and transparency that may be enough to lull the populace into complacency and distract them from pushing for greater governmental transparency. Officially sanctioned means of expressing dissent will continue to be allowed and rather than banning these outlets, the government will seek to direct them to its own purposes. Through direct and indirect manipulation of the internet, the government will allow enough dissent to be expressed that discontent should not reach dangerous levels. Outright censorship is a crude method of control that can easily be circumvented; it also brings resentment when netizens see firsthand usage censorship, but as technology improves; those who want to

control information and those who seek its free flow will be part of a see-saw

race. The Chinese government will continue to adapt to the changing landscape

of technology, as will those who dare to dissent or desire to go beyond arbitrary

limits pressed upon them

Technology can be used to control netizens, until a point is reached where

technology will allow the same netizens to overcome these control barriers.

Technological controls, currently, are not absolute and the current see-saw battle

between those who would control information and those who seek it free flow.

But when more subtle methods are used, such as posting officially sanctioned

messages praising the government in blogs, the line between censorship,

propaganda, and public relations becomes blurred. As stated by Moss in his

blog, "The Chinese government's attempts to manage communication within

China are much more socially significant than its efforts to block undesirable

content from outside China" (Moss, 2008).

7: CONCLUSIONS

One must consider just what Chinese information seekers think about the three main routes that officials employ to control internet flow. These methods are the blocking of access to external sites, the interference with internal communications, and censorship. These blockings, to most people, could seem onerous and frustration-provoking. In the absence of surveys or scientific research, one must resort to reading blog content to discern reactions to official proscriptions.

In a New Yorker article, Evan Osnos states, "Younger Chinese friends of mine regard the firewall as they would an officious lifeguard at a swimming pool – an occasional, largely irrelevant, intrusion" (Osnos, 2008). In the article, Osnos interviews Tang Jie, a university student in Shanghai who circumvents the blockages by using proxy servers, by which a user can link to an overseas server and avoid blocked connection points. One factor that facilitates such circumventions is the very large number of Chinese overseas students, currently around six-seven thousand in the United States alone (Osnos, 2008). They can supply those in China with differing perspectives on what is available and what should be available online.

Perhaps, as the author of the Imagethief blog has noted, Chinese censorship of internet content "is to inflict inconvenience rather than lack of

access." (Moss, 2008). Of course, as noted elsewhere, even such inconvenience can frustrate those who seek alternative news and views.

However is it possible that the censorship by Chinese authorities does not eliminate prohibited ideas, and thoughts and discussion about them? Have Chinese internet users and blog readers developed an innate ability to think critically about what is denied to them, as well as about what they see? If so, the discussions which used to occur in the commons can continue. Forces for change can still form at the local level to challenge authorities. A major shift from commons-sited discussions is the widespread dissemination of discussions throughout those within China those in other countries.

The purported ability of those whose access to blogs and other internet content is thwarted to develop critical thinking on missing content is a factor that could be considered in further research and discussion. Perhaps Chinese blog readers are acquiring and honing the ability to conduct media criticism and analysis without studying it formally. Many memoirs of those who experienced the Cultural Revolution state the ability to read between the lines of government proclamations and discerning the importance of information that is purposefully left out was an important survival skill, this sense for critical thought most likely remains given the Communist Party remains opaque and adverse to operational transparency. In particular, Chinese blog readers seem to be considering how the way an author constructs his or her content, as well as the means the Chinese government employ to impede access to content, engenders both understanding and response.

The writing, dissemination, reading, and commenting on blogs could be considered a social movement. While the Chinese government wants to control access to information, it fails to achieve this due to the electronic form of the medium. Many alternate pathways exist for provision of and access to content in the internet. Past protest have grown and achieved more freedoms for the people due to the spread of information despite government attempts at restriction. Ultimately, are blogs changing the nature of the Chinese society or culture? Just the fact that the government is reacting to how its citizens use the internet demonstrates the importance of this issue. With such high numbers of people with access to the internet, this is an area the Chinese government cannot ignore if it is to maintain social stability.

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