Tuning the people China's delicate balance between digital freedom and repression

John Keane

James Madison famously remarked that a popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy. Two decades ago, the government of the People's Republic of China set out to disprove this rule. Rejecting talk of farce and tragedy, its rulers now claim their authority is rooted within a new and higher form of popular government, a "post-democratic" way of handling power which delivers goods and services, promotes social harmony and roots out "harmful behavior" using state-of-the-art information-control methods more complex and much craftier than Madison could ever have imagined.

In contrast to the period of Maoist totalitarianism, the new Chinese authoritarianism does not demand total submission from its subjects. In such matters as the clothing they wear, where they work and which social company they keep, most citizens are mostly left alone by the authorities. Belief in communism is no longer compulsory; few people now believe its tenets and the ruling Party (as a popular joke has it) comes dressed in Nike trainers and a polo shirt topped with a Marxist hat. The regime officially welcomes intellectuals, foreign-trained professionals and private entrepreneurs (once denounced and banned as "capitalist roaders") into its upper ranks.

The Party is everywhere. It prides itself on its active recruitment strategy and its organisations are rooted in all key business enterprises, including foreign companies. The methods of governing are clever. Ruling by means of generalised in-depth controls, or through widespread violence and fear, mostly belong to the past. While the authorities reject both independent public monitoring of its power and free and fair general elections, they actively solicit the support of their subjects.

Protestors are crushed, but also bribed and consulted. Obsessive controls from above are matched by stated commitments to rooting out corruption and the rule of law. There is much talk of democracy with "Chinese characteristics." Top-down bossing and bullying are measured. The regime seems calculating, flexible, dynamic, constantly willing to change its ways in order to remain the dominant guiding power.

Nowhere is this trend more strikingly evident than in the field of information. China first hitched itself to the Web in 1994; the country now has an estimated 500 million users, twice as many as in the United States. Two-thirds of them are under the age of thirty. The Chinese Academy of Sciences reports that in 2008-2009 alone 90 million Chinese citizens connected to the Internet for the first time. The overall size of Internet traffic is expected to double every 5.32 years. What is not officially reported is that the sphere of text messages, bulletin boards, blogs and other digital platforms nurtures the spirit of public resistance to arbitrary power, often with remarkable vigor. According to some estimates, 60 percent of Chinese netizens have used the Internet to express opinions aimed at scrutinising government activities.

Heavy-handed government censorship methods, popularly known as the "Great Firewall of China," are still used frequently to suppress points of view that diverge from the dominant positions formulated by the information office of the

Kurzgefasst: In der Volksrepublik China sieht sich die Regierung mit den neuen Möglichkeiten der Meinungsäußerung konfrontiert, die die elektronische Kommunikation der Bevölkerung bietet. Diese bringt zunehmend ihre Auffassungen frei zum Ausdruck und findet viele Wege, Neuigkeiten und Meinungen zu verbreiten. Spott, Satire und Verschlüsselung sind beliebt, um der staatlichen Kontrolle auszuweichen. Repression gegen kritische Stimmen gibt es weiterhin, aber das Regime versucht auch, die interaktiven Medien zu nutzen für sanfte Formen der Beeinflussung.

Summary: The People's Republic of China represents a frontal challenge to preconceived understandings of the multi-media communications revolution of our times. It resembles a giant political laboratory in which many crafty techniques are being developed to harness the web-structured media usage and digital resistance of citizens to the controlling dynamics of a new type of authoritarian regime.

[Foto: Udo Borchert]

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state council (the cabinet) and the propaganda departments of the ruling party. Yet information flows in China are not simply blocked, firewalled or censored. The productive channelling of dissenting opinions into government control mechanisms is a basic feature of the political order. Especially remarkable is the way the authorities treat unfettered online citizen communication as an instrument for improving the ability to govern, as an early warning device, even as a virtual steam valve for venting grievances in their favour.

The co-optation strategy draws upon the efforts of thousands of government employees who post anonymous online commentaries designed to support policies favoured by the Party. There is also a vast labyrinth of surveillance that depends on a well-organised, reportedly 40,000-strong Internet police force. Skilled at snooping on Wi-Fi users in cyber cafés and hotels, it uses sophisticated data-mining software that tracks down keywords on social networking sites such as Xiaonei and search engines such as Baidu, along the way issuing warnings to Web hosts to amend or delete content considered unproductive of "harmony." A combination of URL filtering with the blanking of keywords labelled as "harmful" or "anti-social" is also a common strategy used to tamper with tens of thousands of websites.

Potentially embarrassing or confidential news is meanwhile filtered through the so-called *neican* system of internal reference reports provided on a strictly limited basis to high-ranking government officials by trustworthy official Party journalists from organs such as the *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*. The reporting system is in effect an elaborate surveillance mechanism operated for Party members by Party members. Government officials working in "situation centres" meanwhile watch for signs of brewing unrest or angry public reactions. Reports are passed to local propaganda departments, where action is taken. The 2012 concerted campaign against Bo Xilai and his family shows that state media can be instructed to take a certain line on any particular issue; and that news websites can be told whether or how they should cover the matter, for instance by sensationalising reports in order to silence critics, or by keeping the coverage short, so as to bury it down deep memory holes.

Calls for "discipline" and "self-regulation" are commonplace. So-called "rumor refutation" departments, staffed by censors, pitch in. They scan posts for forbidden topics and issue knockdown rebuttals.

Within the China labyrinth, a pivotal role is played by licensed Internet companies. Bound by constant reminders that safety valves can turn into explosive devices, they use filtering techniques to delete or amend "sensitive" content. Much cleverer tactics are also in use, including efforts by the authorities to draw citizens into a cat's cradle of suspicion, praise, denunciation and control. The Party state is constantly on the lookout for new and improved ways of governing its population, for instance by means of an elaborate system of government websites designed to interact with their subjects, many of whom have online access.

This makes them prime targets of government appeals. Citizens are encouraged to report anti-government conversations, or recruited as hirelings known as "50-cent bloggers." They are routinely urged to become "Internet debaters." There are experiments (as in Guangdong Province) with virtual petition offices, online Webcast forums where citizens can raise complaints and watch and hear officials handle them.

Organized "chats" between the authorities and citizens are flourishing. Such methods – "authoritarian deliberation" is the phrase used by some scholars – come packaged in official assurances about the need to encourage "transparency" and to "balance" online opinions for the sake of harmoniously "guiding public opinion."

What are we to make of these techniques of repressive tolerance? They certainly confirm the paradoxical rule that the governments of authoritarian regimes are much more sensitive to popular resistance than those of democratic

regimes. Looking from the top down, likening the Chinese authorities to skilled doctors of the body politic, some observers wax eloquently about the new surveillance tactics of "continuous tuning" (*tiao*) of the body politic. The simile understates the ways in which the labyrinthine system of unusually well-coordinated do's and don'ts is backed by pre-digital methods: fear served with cups of tea in the company of censors; reprimands, sackings and sideways promotions; early-morning swoops by plainclothes police known as "interceptors;" illegal detentions; violent beatings by unidentified thugs; disappearances and imprisonment, sometimes (reports suggest) in "black jails" operated by outsourced mafia gangs employed by the authorities.

Proponents of the Communist Party's Web-monitoring tactics are typically silent about such institutionalised violence. They also overstate the efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the China labyrinth; the new democratic principle that complex systems of power are prone to failure, "normal accidents" and outright breakdown unless they are subject to mechanisms of open public scrutiny remains a forbidden topic in China. Champions of the China labyrinth also ignore the popular resentments sparked by a regulatory system that treats more than a few subjects as ticklish, or taboo. To put things simply, the Party authorities are opposed to monitory democracy (*jiandushi minzhu*), in the richest sense of free and fair general elections combined with ongoing public monitoring of their power by independent watchdogs.

It is true that many things are permitted: finance, housing markets, sports, and light entertainment inoffensive to the Party leadership's morals. Yet other subjects are less straightforward. Blanket public criticism of the leading role of the Party and its leading figures is not permitted. Equally taboo is fair-minded analysis of "sensitive" regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, or "sensitive" topics, such as religion and the past crimes committed by the Party.

Such restrictions breed public resentment and resistance, which (unsurprisingly) is most pronounced within the world of on-line communications. The range and depth of resistance to unaccountable power are astonishing. The re-

Repression. Die Polizei in der Stadt Foshan (Proving Guangdong) lässt Computer illegaler Internet–Bars zerstören (aufgenommen am 19. August 2010). [Foto: Xie Zhibiao / ChinaFotoPress /Xie Zhibiao/MaxPPP]

gime comes wrapped in propaganda, but counter-publics flourish. Helped by sophisticated proxies and other methods of avoiding censorship, salacious tales of official malfeasance circulate fast, and in huge numbers, fuelled by online jokes, songs, satire, mockery and code words that develop meme-like qualities and function as attacks on government talk of the "harmonious society." An early sensational example was the "mud-grass horse" mascot, a mythical animal that fights against Party control of free expression and symbolizes a Web-savvy opponent of regime censorship. Digital media users commonly re-tweet their posts (a practice known as "knitting," the word for which sounds like "weibo"). Messages easily morph into conversations, illustrated with pictures. The consequence: instantly forwarded posts tend to keep ahead of the censors, whose efforts at removing online material are countered by such tactics as re-tweeted screenshots.

The aggregate effect is that conversations readily go viral, causing large-scale "mass Internet incidents," as happened (during 2010) when a citizen nicknamed "Brother Banner," a software engineer in Wuxi, was catapulted into online celebrity overnight after holding a banner that read "Not Serving the People" outside the gate of a local labour relations office to protest its failure to intervene in his pay dispute with his former employer. The banner challenged the Party's slogan, "Serving the People." Officials were deeply embarrassed by a one-person protest that won national prominence through the Internet and, eventually, coverage in official media.

The great significance of citizens' initiatives of this kind is the way they put their finger on hypocrisy. Relying heavily upon networked media, they project locally specific goals that for the moment do not challenge the state's legitimacy as such but instead call on the government to live up to its promises of "harmony," to listen and respond to the concerns of citizens in matters of material and spiritual well-being. The upshot is that the authorities now find themselves trapped in a constant tug-of-war between their will to control, negotiated change, public resistance and unresolved confusion. They may pride themselves on building a "post-democratic" regime which seems calculating, flexible and dynamic, willing to change its ways in order to remain the dominant guiding power. Yet they also know well the new Chinese proverb: ruling used to be like hammering a nail into wood, now it is much more like balancing on a slippery egg.

Whether the authorities can sustain their present balancing act, so proving James Madison wrong, seems at least an open question. Within the China labyrinth, the 21st-century spirit of monitory democracy is alive and well. Whether and how it will prevail, probably with Chinese characteristics, against the crafty forces of digital surveillance, is among the global political questions of our time.

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