

THE INTERNET AND "THE GREAT FIREWALL OF CHINA"

Nour-eddine Labiad

[The Internet] should serve democracy," claims Benjamin Barber in his essay, "Which Technology and Which Democracy?" However, the use of the Internet to enhance democracy in China is controversial. Many elements contribute to the complexity of this controversy, such as how democracy is defined (Barber 37) and whether and how the Internet should be used to enhance democracy. Some, like Randolph Kluver and Indrajit Banerjee in "Political Culture, Regulation, and Democratization" argue that the Internet is a good tool for promoting democracy in China (33). Others, mainly represented by the Chinese government, argue that the Internet is a good tool for economic development, but not for social and political stability. Many questions have yet to be answered concerning the Internet and democracy in China: How can the Internet be a democratizing force if it is censored by the Chinese government? Is the Internet really under the control of any government? How can the Chinese people evade government censorship of the Internet to gain full access to information? Are there any alternatives to what has been called the "great firewall of China" ("Internet Censorship")? Are there some aspects of the Internet that can not be censored completely? Many functions of the Internet, such as email and Bulletin Board Systems have demonstrated potential as democratizing forces. The censorship imposed by the Chinese government prevents the Internet from being a fully democratizing force; nevertheless, the Internet may be a strong tool for promoting and enhancing democracy in China even if it is not entirely free from control or censorship by the Chinese government.

The Internet in China is worth analyzing, since as Sally J. McMillan and Jang-Sun Hwang mention in their article "Nailing Jell-O to the Wall and Herding Cats," "Internet use in China grew from about 1 million users in mid-1998 to 26.5 million by mid-2001" (1). Though the Chinese government acknowledges the importance of the Internet, it still imposes a lot of restrictions on it, especially over the information flow. As have most world countries, China has been active in adopting new communications technologies. The Internet was first opened to the public in China in 1994. Since that time, writes Yuezhi Zhao in his book *Media, Market, and Democracy*, "China has set in train a variety of legal instruments issued by several government agencies to control activities relating to computer information systems" (22). In

"China's New Media Sector: Keeping the State In," Shanthi Kalathil observes that as far back as 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party came to power, government regulations on information and communication technologies such as the Internet were set so that they promoted economic development and strengthened the Chinese government's political control (490). The Chinese government claims that the purpose behind regulating the Internet is democratization, which "was the key issue in the struggle for media reform in 1989" (Zhao 1). However, media technologies may have first been regulated to promote democracy during the 1989 reform, but starting from 1992, observes Tamaara Shie in *The Tangled Web: Does the Internet Offer Promise or Peril for the Chinese Communist Party?* "the government began to consider the commercial side of the media (526) more than its democratizing force.

The Chinese government claims that the main reason behind censoring the Internet is to protect civil society from social instability. According to Endeshaw in *"Internet Regulation in China: The Never-ending Cat and Mouse Game,"* the government declares that it restricts content that is "harmful to social and public security" (22). Similarly, Kalathil, mentions that Internet Content Providers were prohibited "from posting information that "undermines social stability" through some rules issued in 2000 (493). In fact, the truth is that the Chinese government seeks to protect itself. China is only one of a number of countries such as Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, and Iran that consider the Internet a "pernicious tool to break down its social and political order" (Kalathil 41), and that the Internet is threatening the stability of the government itself. Geoffrey Taubman, in *"A Not-So World Wide Web: The Internet, China, and the Challenges to Non-democratic Rule,"* argues that many elements of the Internet can be destructive to a non-democratic system, such as the Chinese, that controls and censors all information related to democracy (256). Samuel Huntington likewise argues that "the non-democratic rule is difficult to sustain in societies where free flows of information exist" (Taubman 259), which threatens political stability. Unlike Taubman and Huntington, Kalathil argues that there is little proof that the Internet is threatening the Chinese political system (490). Nevertheless, the fact that the Chinese government imposes many kinds of censorship on the Internet suggests that they perceive it as a threat.

To understand the relationship between the Internet and democracy, we need a practical definition of democracy. In his essay, Barber recommends what he calls a "strong democracy," one in which "citizens actually participate in governing

themselves, if not in all matters all of the time, at least in some matters at least some of the time" (37). Democracy, he adds, is also a process of learning and sharing information (44). In his essay, "Flying Freely but in the Cage," Internet Edgar Huang emphasizes the democratic principal of "open debate, with sufferance of unpopular opinions, and decisions taken by honest voting and thereupon accepted" (145). "Democracy," he believes, "involves participation, and participation, in turn, cries for information" (160). Similarly, Zhao identifies "freedom of opinion, of expression, of speech, of assembly, and of association" as the minimal elements of democracy (9). In fact, information is an important element in all these definitions, and based on these definitions, in order to be considered a democracy, China needs a free flow of information that enables participation of the public in debate.

Some would argue that the Internet encourages democracy by facilitating a free flow of information but that other characteristics of the Internet discourage it. Barber is one of those who believe that the Internet has counter-democratic aspects, such as "solitariness of [its] user interface. . . bias toward images over text. . . and [an] inclination toward audience segmentation" (8). He contends that the segmentation of society caused by the Internet "clearly disadvantages deliberation and pursuit of the common ground and undermines the politics of the democratic participation" (45), dividing the public rather than connecting it. At the same time, he does not deny its ability to enhance democracy. He argues that the Internet "encourage[s] direct democracy and so, as [he] suggested fifteen years ago, it can be instruments of strong democracy" (42). In sum, the Internet has the potential to assist the growth of democracy in China if no obstacles, such as governmental control or censorship, are facing it. However, the most important obstacle that is challenging the Internet in China as a democratizing force is censorship rather than segmentation.

Freed from censorship, the Internet can be a strong instrument to enhance democracy in China. Joseph Nye and William Owens, former Clinton administration Defense Department officials and the authors of *America's Information Edge*, "maintain that information technology has an inherently democratizing force, one that is almost impossible to resist" (Huang 146). Huang, however, challenges Nye and Owens' belief that the Internet has an "inherently democratizing force" through his study which shows that the Internet can not be an inherently democratizing force if the majority of the Chinese do not have access to it and if it Internet is censored. One way the Internet helps to develop democracy is by encouraging freedom of

speech. McMillan and Hwang explain, in detail, through a study they conducted that the Internet “provides a way for citizens to talk with each other and with their government” (121). But, the Internet can be a means of freedom of speech only by encouraging participation in public debate, an essential element of democracy as defined by Barber and others (McMillan and Hwang 121). Although many studies have discussed the Internet censorship imposed by the China, *absolute* censorship remains impossible, since certain functions of the Internet, such as email and the Bulletin Board System, or BBS, are notably difficult to censor.

Email is one aspect of the Internet that has the power to enhance democracy in China in spite of government attempts at censorship. John Bray states in his essay, “Tibet, Democracy, and China” that the use of email “embodies specific characteristics with dynamic implications for democratization. Affordable and quick access to information, unbounded by geographic or institutional restrictions is a critical component for the development of democracy” (158). Similarly, Endenshaw argues that certain aspects of the Internet, such as email, play important roles in diffusing official news to the public (42). Although the Chinese government attempts to control the circulation of information, email remains an important means of information flow. McMillan and Hwang mention that Lin Hai was arrested “for providing 30,000 Chinese e-mail addresses to a U.S.-based Internet democracy magazine” (119), which shows that the Chinese government attempts to censor email because they realize its potential to promote the conditions for democracy.

The Bulletin Board System is another example of how the Internet can potentially encourage democracy in China even though some BBSs are censored by the government. The BBS is an online discussion board affiliated with Web sites where the Chinese can theoretically discuss certain topics such as political issues, and a BBS is perhaps the only place where the Chinese can exchange ideas (Huang 147) Internet and afford an opportunity to exchange information which is necessary for the civic participation that is an essential condition for a “strong democracy.” However, as Kaliathil found, some messages and complaints were censored on the four of the five BBSs in China. Nevertheless, he argues that “chat rooms and bulletin boards focusing on political and social themes allow users to circulate news and opinions, generating discussions not previously possible between users separated by thousands of miles” (494). The flow of information that can be enabled by BBS and chat rooms is a

crucial aspect of democracy, and thus the BBSs have demonstrated much promise for advancing democracy.

While some aspects of the Internet can not be completely censored such as email and BBSs, others such as websites on democracy-related issues are completely blocked and filtered (Zittrain 105). China has been described as the “world champion” of Internet censorship by Reporters without Borders (“Gates Defends”). According to a study by Harvard Law School Berkman Center for Internet and Society done in December 2000, “China has the most extensive Internet censorship in the world” (“China and the Internet”). As Barber explains, “filtering always involves mediation in some form or other, either as a consequence of democratic (consensual) or authoritative (appropriately knowledgeable) criteria or via arbitrary criteria rooted in brute force (it is so because I say it is so, and I have the gun” (42). China’s filtering is the second kind because it is a result of authoritative criteria; in fact, the government sets “legal” regulations and enforces them.. As an example of Internet filtering, Abbott mentions that certain “websites routinely blocked by state security agencies are sites run by dissident groups operating outside the country, such as the US-based Democracy, Human Rights in China, and China News Digest” (103). Generally, Web sites on the subjects of human rights, democracy, civil rights, and freedom of speech are blocked by the Chinese government as are pages that “contain sensitive word[s]” (Zittrain 105). There are many examples of the Chinese government’s censorship practice, one of which is the government’s announcement of its success in blocking a hundred Web sites of human rights and of Tibetan activists in September, 1996 (Huang 159).

Unfortunately, even some companies representing the free and democratic world, such as Google and Microsoft, have condoned the censorship imposed by the Chinese government. Such actions have been “fiercely criticized by human rights groups for towing China’s line on restrictions of free speech” (“Gates Defends”). In the Official blog of Google, Elliot Schrage, Vice President of Global Communications and Public Affairs at Google, Inc., considers the implication that business more important than censorship. He says, “The requirements of doing business in China include self-censorship—something that runs counter to Google’s most basic values and commitments as a company” (“Testimony”). By self-censorship, he means accepting the censorships that are imposed in China by the government. Despite Google’s values, which are supposed to support the free flow of information, Google

launched “a new product for China, google.cn, that respects the content restrictions imposed by Chinese laws and regulations” (“Testimony”). Similarly, Bill Gates of Microsoft, argues that “freedom of information is available in China, despite sites discussing issues such as Tiananmen Square and Taiwan being blocked” (“Gates Defends”). These two examples illustrate how democracy can be jeopardized by business motives, not only in China but possibly anywhere else.

Another factor that is keeping the Internet from playing a full democratizing role is its inaccessibility to much of the Chinese population. In this connection, Huang argues that “even if a democratizing tendency does emerge on the Internet—as there are tentative signs of—there are problems for the majority of citizens in getting access to the technology” (160). We can not deny that the Internet infrastructure is growing very quickly (Huang 158), but Internet growth is still relatively weak in China. Jason Abbott argues in his essay, “that the growth of the Internet is slow in China compared to developed countries such as the United States. The population of China is estimated at 1.3 billion (McMillan & Hwang 158); Abbott cites statistics from the United Nations that show that “57.8 % of the Chinese population live on less than \$2 a day, with nearly a quarter on less on less than \$1” (106). Therefore, since the fees for Internet access in China are US \$50 per month (Bray 171), the majority of the Chinese people are unable to afford Internet access. In 2002, only two percent of the Chinese had access to the Internet (McMillan and Hwang 123), and Huang observes that “With major portion of the population left out of this new technology, using the Internet to develop democracy in China is unrealistic” (160). Without access to the Internet for the majority of the Chinese, democracy remains a distant prospect (Weger and Aakhus 296). Internet accessibility enables the participation of the Chinese in public debate, and without the majority having Internet access, the Chinese population can not benefit from the democratizing aspects of the Internet such as BBS and email.

Though the Chinese government attempts to censor the flow of information on the Internet using legal regulations and technical means of control, it has failed to censor all kinds of information. For example, it has failed to stop groups such as the lobby that supports Tibetan freedom within China and China activists from spreading information not only inside China but outside as well (Bray158). Such groups can spread some of their ideas because the government has failed to impose absolute censorship on the Internet. Bray mentions many examples of websites that

the Chinese pro-democracy activists have used to propagate information that requests more democracy in China: the Silicon Valley for Democracy in China (www.svdc.org) and Human Rights in China (www.hrichina.org) as well as other Web sites (168). At least the Chinese outside of China can open these pro-democracy pages. Bray argues that the Chinese government has failed technically in controlling the Internet because the “sheer volume of information will make the Internet increasingly hard—indeed impossible—to control” (171). Gupa, a Research Scholar at the Centre for East Asian Studies in New Delhi, confirms that there is great difficulty in controlling the Internet, and Jason Lacharite, in his article, “Electronic Decentralization in China” agrees that it is impossible to control all Internet information (333), supporting the Western perspective that is skeptical concerning the possibility of complete Internet censorship (McMillan and Hwang 123). On the other hand, Barber, in *Jihad vs McWorld*, argues that the Chinese government has been successful in fighting democracy (186), and one way has been by filtering the Internet (Zittrain 105). Although *absolute* filtering of the information flow over the Internet is not possible, the government has been successful in filtering and censoring a large portion of it.

Though Internet censorship is disadvantageous in many ways, it has one main advantage, which is restricting pornography. Taubman argues that China uses certain filter software to block pornographic pages online (265), and apparently, the Chinese government makes other efforts to censor pornography. Abbott also asserts that “across China municipal authorities have routinely carried out raids on so-called “illegal” Internet cafes ostensibly for failure to pay taxes or because they disseminate pornographic CDs” (103). Censoring the flow of information over the Internet opposes the basis of democracy, but censoring pornography on Web pages is beneficial. However, the threat of pornography should not provide an excuse for the Chinese government to deprive the Chinese citizens of democracy-related information.

The Internet has the potential to inform the Chinese people by providing them with news, which does promote democracy. S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne contend in their essay “Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News” that whether news is considered as a narrative or not, it does “inform [and] of course readers learn from it” (69). Though Bird and Dardenne refer to news in general, Internet news has the same informative function. In fact, the Chinese do need to know what is going on in China, which may ultimately lead to the

participation in public debate that promotes democracy. Though the Internet might have the ability to orient and influence society as McMillan and Hwang argue (113), its main function should be to provide the Chinese with news or information. However, as Sonika Gupa asserts in "The Internet and Democracy in China," the Internet is not yet leading to social change. Whether the Internet leads to social change or not does not matter; what does matter is that the Internet can provide the Chinese with news. In fact, the Internet has the ability to enable the flow of information among the Chinese people even though it is censored. Although the Chinese government is trying to maximize the economic and developmental impacts of the Internet and minimize its political and social outcomes, the Internet is the most important means for the Chinese to receive news and express their ideas through Bulletin Board Systems and email, and therefore has the potential to advance debate and democracy.

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COMMENTARY: NATALIE BURAK

In "The Internet and 'the Great Firewall of China,'" Nour-eddine Labiad offers an insightful look at the debate over the potential of the Internet in China to encourage democracy. The Chinese government's censorship of certain aspects of the Internet which may pose a threat to their authority seems to us in the West to be unlawful and unethical, but for the nearly 1.3 billion people who reside in this Communist country, it has, for the most part, been accepted as a way of life. As Labiad has described, most of the Web sites that have fallen under government control are those that pertain to pornography and politics, both within China and the rest of the world, and other related topics which the government fears may instill democratic ideals or thoughts of rebellion in the minds of the citizens. The author argues that the Internet can be a strong instrument to enhance democracy in China if it is free from censorship; however, the Internet is not free from censorship in China or in many other parts of the world. Given that the Internet is under such strict control in China, can it still be a force for democracy? And if so, how have the Chinese citizens found ways around the government censors to communicate their thoughts and ideas and make their voices heard by the rest of the populace? Any such actions may still be too "underground" to comment on accurately, but some possibilities do come to mind.

Taking the United States of America as an example, many new trends have arisen in recent years in the realm of Internet communication and networking through the prevalence of online communities formed through the use of Weblogs, or "blogs" as they are more commonly known. Sites like Xanga, MySpace, Open Diary, and others provide users with an essentially open forum to post their innermost

thoughts, feelings, and musings, their likes and dislikes, and others aspects of their personalities into online diaries easily accessible to anyone with Internet access. While some use this primarily to vent their frustrations and experiences in everyday life, others have a more specific agenda: entire Web sites have been dedicated to public opinion and criticism of American political figures, such as BlogsforBush.com, or VAPoliticalBlogs.com for Virginia residents, amidst thousands of others all readily available to Internet users with a taste for the political.

As Labiad has outlined, such Web sites would not be available to Internet users in China, but who is to say that a political activist in China cannot start a site on his or her own? That is to say, because online communities like MySpace have only reached such heights of popularity in the USA in the past half-decade or so, and because they are not explicitly created for propagandistic purposes, the Chinese government may not be so quick to look to these as sources of dissidence within the Communist system. These would allow Chinese citizens to post their questions or concerns about the government system or other institutions in their country in a publicly-accessible forum, but in a less public and overtly-rebellious way. One shortcoming may be that these online journals may only be accessible to a very small percentage of China's 1.3 billion inhabitants, as Labiad has noted that only an estimated two percent have Internet access. Even so, two percent of such a vast population is still roughly 26 million people—26 million opportunities for an individual's voice to be heard, and for it to be turned into an action by the joining together of like-minded individuals.

Labiad is not asking for a revolution, nor am I; however, it does seem that the Internet could still be a viable medium for the spread of ideas, and indeed for democracy in China. One does not need to overthrow an entire government or Communist ideals that have been in place as long as they have in China in order to plant seeds of change that may enable future generations of Chinese people and leaders to see that an exchange of ideas does not have to be negative in all cases.