DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVIC SOCIETY ONLINE? INTERNET VIGILANTISM AND STATE CONTROL IN CHINESE CYBERSPACE

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Abstract. The number of Internet users is growing exponentially in China and Chinese netizens are slowly developing social groupings online that influence events and situations in the "real" world. The Chinese government is predictably wary of these developments as an emerging community of netizens is increasingly becoming aware of its great potential influence. Over the past two years (2006 and 2007) an uneasy unofficial truce has emerged so that netizens are relatively free to criticize and discuss local issues or events, while the central government suppresses everything it regards as excessive criticism or as an attack against the ruling party. Chinese netizens seem to have accepted these conditions to a large extent, and often explicitly support the central government while attacking local officials, businesses, institutions, etc. or even other netizens perceived to have broken the unwritten rules of Chinese Cyberspace.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussing China's current Internet policies and the online society that has grown around them is a daunting task. The situation is still highly fluid and politically and philosophically controversial. While websites like YouTube or Facebook have established their presence in most people's minds as symbols of the Internet, both were only made available to the general public in 2005 – less than three years ago. The Internet and many of the sites frequented both inside and outside China, and which are often portrayed as the driving forces behind new societal developments, are still in their infancy. Governments everywhere, not only in China, are struggling to strike a balance between civil liberties and control of a new medium of communication.

Alongside these official struggles to interpret the state's role in and relationship with the Internet, an ideological fight is ongoing over the character the Internet should have, echoing the political debates of the past 500 years. Should the Internet be free? What does "freedom" mean? Are there limits to freedom? Do individuals have rights (and/or duties) on the Internet? Who safeguards those rights? How are those rights defined? Who has the power to define and police these rights? Are there international standards that Internet users should follow and can claim as their rights?

The list of debates is endless, and the spectrum of ideologies applied to provide answers covers the whole range from Thomas Hobbes' controlling monster state to Mikhail Bakunin's vision of collectivist anarchy. There are those who see the Internet as the last truly free place on Earth. Some see it as a lawless place, where the technologically advanced prey on the weak. Some present it as a new world that will bring democracy and freedom to all, while others argue that it is merely a new form of communication technology that is subject to the laws and regulations of the time and space its users occupy.

This article will not delve into these fundamental debates. Instead, it aims to provide a neutral description of some of the developments in the relationship between state and cyber-society in China. It is meant to provide background and a starting point for debates on the future development of China and of the role of Internet users and the emerging online civil society within these processes of development. The paper as such does not advocate any specific political agenda, be it pro-China or anti-China, nor formulate judgments or recommendations for the fu-

ture. Rather, its purpose is to provoke an open, academic debate on current events in China and on how to analyze (and understand) them.

2. THE INTERNET IN CHINA

China's Internet has been the focus of much attention over the past few years. Academics, journalists, activists, and bloggers have all repeatedly examined the Chinese Internet and pointed to some of the differences between Chinese Internet space and the networks accessed by the rest of the world. While comparisons of Chinese Internet space with others are useful, this article focuses on the relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese Internet users, or netizens. Comparisons will only be employed to allow for a better appreciation of the situation in China.

The Internet in China emerged in tandem with the Internet in Europe and America, but its structures and set up soon diverged (For more details on the history of China's Internet see CINIC, n.d.). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, academic institutions in China started to network computers and universities with the help of funding and knowledge transfers from European and North American research institutions. These networks grew and in 1994 China was connected to the Internet through a dedicated line between China and the Sprint Corporation in the USA. Over the next two years, additional connections to the Internet were created and the structure of and control over the Chinese Internet was decided.

Four organizations were created to provide Internet access in China: the China Education and Research Network (CERNET), the China Science and Technology Network (CSTNet), ChinaNET, and the China Golden Bridge Network (ChinaGBN). The latter two provided commercial Internet access, while the former two were set up for educational and research institutions. In early 1997, the public was allowed onto the Internet for the first time, albeit only via the already established networks. This established a pattern for the development of the Internet in China since then, in that China's netizens have only been able to access and use spaces that the government or government-controlled institutions have established and still exercise control over.

The state or state-controlled entities have owned the physical backbone of the Internet in China instead of privately-held companies, as is customary in Europe and North America. As a result, the central government has always been in a much stronger position to control Chinese cyberspace. In China, the government does not have to attempt to gain greater control over the Internet; instead, it is the government that allows everything that goes on in Chinese cyberspace to happen, which is a very different situation altogether from Western discourses on the Internet as the last free, unrestricted, and non-controlled space for communication.

In China, the freedom people have on the Internet is a freedom ultimately granted to them by the central government or its agencies, although often more from a laissez-faire attitude than from a decision to grant Chinese netizens more freedom. The Chinese government seems to see the Internet on the whole more like a children's playground where Chinese adults can engage in games, an attitude born out in 2003 by an announcement of the State General Administration of Sport that formally approved E-sports, i.e. online gaming, as a national athletic sports discipline. China, together with Korea, has for the past few years started to engage in international E-sports events and competitions, including a few world championships and not a few students at universities today dream of becoming professional online gamers and E-sports athletes.

3. STATE CONTROL OVER THE CHINESE INTERNET

The Chinese Central government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have been comparatively successful in establishing – or more correctly, keeping – control over the Internet and in limiting the access its citizens have to contents deemed inappropriate or dangerous. It has to be noted, though, that the official Chinese criteria for evaluation of what is inappropriate and what

is permissible differs substantively from European or North-American definitions. Governments across Europe and North America have largely focused on the application of national or international laws to the conceptualized international setting of the Internet. As a result, cross-national issues (e.g. copyright, privacy, etc.) or legal variations between countries (e.g. gambling restrictions, bans on Nazi memorabilia, etc.) have dominated Internet discourses.

In China, such considerations have only played a minor role within official discourses on the Internet. One example is computer piracy, which in stark contrast to the Euro-American Internet, is practiced widely and openly on sites that offer the free and direct download of scanned-in books, software, movies, etc. without being hindered by authorities. Although piracy is officially illegal, copyright regulations remain under-enforced, while the government's attention centers more on content that is judged to be harmful to Chinese society, e.g. pornography, religion, political activism, ethnic separatism, etc.

Additionally, in China the emphasis is not on laws and regulations, but instead on self-regulation and self-discipline. Again in contrast to Europe and North America, there is a noticeable lack of calls for increased regulation of the Internet by the government. One striking example of this difference is the call by teachers in England for the government to enforce privacy laws on the Internet after students had posted a video of parts of a lesson on YouTube. In a similar case in China that will be discussed in more detail below, the Chinese government asked all involved to exercise more restraint, and there were no calls for government action.

Since 1997, when China's cyberspace was opened up to ordinary citizens, state-run and state-controlled institutions have repeatedly called on Internet users to exercise self-discipline and to restrain themselves. These admonishments have resulted in the formulation of documents, published in 2002, 2004, and 2005, that detail the level of self-discipline expected of Chinese netizens. Despite the level of control the central government has or could employ in Chinese cyberspace, it appears as if it is more a matter of slowly allowing more freedom on the Internet instead of fighting to gain control over the web. When pushed to do so, the central government has shown that it possesses the ability to shut down those parts of the Chinese Internet that displease China's leaders very quickly, be it online blogs, forums, or more recently pornography websites running on servers inside China. Extreme levels of control are however only rarely employed by Chinese authorities and usually only in cases where an intervention is part of a larger political campaign or crackdown on specific issues.

The normal control exercised by the Chinese government over the Internet experience of Chinese users consists of four highly effective strategies. These are the "Great Fire-Wall of China" (GFW), ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words, or phrases, the coercion of multinational technology corporations, and real-world access-controls. These strategies, while not uniformly successful and often unevenly employed, have had a major influence on the Chinese Internet, as Internet users have not only been affected directly, but have also adapted their own behavior so as to exist within the framework provided by the state.

The "Great Fire-Wall of China" presents itself to the user not as an inflexible and clearly defined barrier, but instead as a multi-faceted and ever-changing system of highly localized rules. Access to websites outside China can vary widely between different cities and changes from time to time. One constant in the GFW is the relatively slow access and loading speed of websites outside China when compared to websites inside China. There are only a limited number of physical connections between the Chinese Internet and the outside world, which creates a technological bottleneck that makes frequent visits to websites outside China unattractive. When measuring the speed of an individual Internet connection via several of the many speed meters available online, intra-China links are 5-10 times as fast as links to international websites. While not impossible to surmount, this slowdown of the Internet on sites outside China has resulted in a marked lack of interest of casual Chinese Internet users in sites perceived to be plagued with a lack of speed and frequent time-outs.

The limited number of access points to the Chinese Internet also makes the blocking of specific websites or domains easier to enforce, by for example using node-side scripts to block all web pages on the servers of http://news.bbc.co.uk/, while allowing users to continue browsing http://www.bbc.co.uk/. Such node-side scripting enables Chinese government departments to institute temporary restrictions, to allow local variations, and to enforce specifically targeted bans on sites that displease them. During the annual meetings of the National People's Congress, for example, CNN, Reuters, BBC, and other news sites often become difficult or impossible to access without resorting to the use of Internet proxies.

A number of research teams at universities in the UK and the USA have recently started to investigate the exact nature of the node-side scripting to determine how the GFW operates, but nothing has been published yet. It is clear, though, that different physical entry-points to the Chinese Internet are using different scripts and that the GFW is neither uniform nor unchanging. Netizens in Shanghai might have access to the CNN website while those in Beijing are blocked, but the Beijing version of the GFW instead allows netizens to access the blogspot blogging service that is inaccessible from Shanghai, etc. A month later, the reverse might be true, or an entirely different set of rules could be in place. This even affects online email services (e.g., Gmail, Yahoo, and Hotmail) and expatriates living in China often find they have to switch between the three from time to time, as they become blocked or unblocked.

ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words is another form of control government departments at all levels can exercise in China. If a Chinese netizen, for instance, tries to access sites with the terms "Falun Gong" or "Tian An Men Massacre" on them, the connection between the Internet user's computer and the server with the offensive content is interrupted which leads to a message back that the web page or site cannot be found or does not exist. In some cases, the user is then redirected to a different web site hosted inside China, which serves as a warning to the user that the access problem is of political and not of technological nature. Advanced users can circumvent these blocks via Internet proxies, such as the popular Tor service that has even been integrated into the Firefox web browser, but again most of China's casual Internet users are deterred from accessing information Chinese government officials deem inappropriate.

The combination of being able to target specific servers and to black-list specific terms or phrases has had the additional benefit for the Chinese government of allowing them to put pressure on multi-national technology corporations and to co-opt them into improving official control over the Internet. Multi-national technology corporations (e.g., Yahoo, Google, Cisco, etc.) have found it easier and more economically viable to work with Chinese authorities instead of trying to ignore their demands while still doing business in and with China. While these companies have come under much criticism in the USA and in Europe for their concessions to the Chinese government, the physical structure of the Chinese Internet and the extent of official control over it makes doing business while ignoring official wishes almost impossible. As a result, Yahoo forwards emails with offensive or – in China – illegal content to the Chinese authorities, while both Yahoo and Google default users to special Chinese versions of their search engines that have politically offensive content excluded from search results. Cisco also advises government departments, including the police and Chinese security agencies, on how to improve their control over the data streams processed through Cisco's backbone servers in China.

The cooperation between multinationals and Chinese authorities is extensive, and while European and North American activists have criticized these mostly American companies, both the legal situation and the set up of the Internet in China make full cooperation economically imperative. In this context it should also be noted briefly that such criticisms seem to focus more on the political ideology of the Chinese government than the increasing control of governments and government agencies over the Internet. The National Security Agency (NSA) in the USA has been reading emails for years, and in the United Kingdom employers are legally liable for the content of emails sent from company servers, thus forcing them to either ban all emails from their offices, or to check them for inappropriate content. A French court forced Ya-

hoo to remove items from its auction website that the French legal system found objectionable, and Yahoo cooperated with this censorship of content available to French Internet users. Compared to the level of cooperation European and North American governments and their departments have enjoyed from these same corporations, it is remarkable that they should come under criticism for providing similar services to the Chinese government and its agencies.

The least effective method of control uses "real world" access-controls that focus on individual and enterprise users of computers, instead of addressing the content of websites. In theory, if not always in practice, all Internet users in China have to register before being able to access the Internet. Before Internet lines are installed in a home, the home owner and the main occupant, e g. someone renting an apartment, have to register for the service with their ID cards or passports. Internet cafes are legally required to register for business permits, and to record personal details for all users who use their services which are then checked by the local police. The effectiveness of these measures is hampered, though, through their lackluster application and enforcement at a local level, which only changes during high profile government campaigns that push for a strict adherence to the rules and regulations of Internet access.

Similar to the application of other rules, regulations, and laws in the People's Republic of China, registration requirements for Internet users are usually not strictly enforced. This situation only changes when events force the central government or local government departments to organize a campaign against specific problem issues. One such issue was the deadly arson attack on an Internet cafe in Beijing in 2002 by two young teenagers. Many of the customers using the Internet cafe at the time were unable to escape the flames as the fire doors were inaccessible and the windows had been barred. This resulted in the closing down of most of the Internet cafes in Beijing until each had passed a fire safety inspection, as well as the temporary enforcement of regulations prohibiting under-age teenagers from entering Internet cafes, with an increased attendant emphasis on registration requirements for all Internet users.

The overall picture that emerges from an overview over the strategies employed by the Chinese government to control both access to and the content of the Internet in China confirms that the Chinese government has generally adopted a laissez-faire attitude and policy towards Chinese cyberspace, expecting local netizens to exercise self-restraint and self-discipline. It is also clear that this is a choice made by the authorities and does not stem from a lack of technological capabilities. In the following section, the article discusses some of the ways Chinese netizens have used the freedom given to them by authorities, not only to regulate their own behavior, but also increasingly to influence events in the real world, thereby forcing local and central authorities to react.

4. CHINESE VIGILANTES

During 2006 and 2007 a number of incidents occurred in China's cyberspace that demonstrated the growing levels of organization and connectivity of Chinese Internet users. If taken on their own, each of these cases merely illustrates how Chinese netizens express their displeasure with specific localized events. Seen together and as examples for numerous similar occurrences during the past few years, they allow for much broader conclusions. They demonstrate several trends in the behavior of Chinese netizens that indicate the development and the official acceptance of a civil society in China's cyberspace. This virtual civil society is growing in influence and has repeatedly caused disturbances in the off-line world that have forced the Chinese government to act and to intervene in specific local situations. In the following paragraphs this article will discuss several cases of Internet vigilantism to introduce the reader to the phenomenon and to demonstrate a number of commonalities between the different cases.

One of the first incidents to gain widespread notice in the Chinese Internet sphere and the worldwide press was an accusation of infidelity a dedicated World of Warcraft (WoW) gamer posted on a bulletin board (BBS) against his wife in April 2006 (Fox Knight, 2006; French

2006). A man suspected his wife of infidelity with a student she had met while playing WoW and on checking some of his wife's log files, messages, and emails, he found proof of an ongoing liaison between the two. Instead of confronting them directly, though, he wrote a 5,000 word post on a popular BBS, accusing his wife and the student publicly of adultery and asking fellow netizens for their help. Netizens responded in great numbers and within days the real name of the student behind the WoW handle that the betrayed husband had discovered was posted online together with his address, phone number, etc. Enraged netizens started harassing the student and his family to a degree that he and his entire family barricaded themselves into their family home and disconnected all lines of communication to the outside world to escape the harassment and threats. The student's university and the parent's employers were contacted by netizens asking for their immediate dismissals, and extremist posters on blogs and BBS forums called for the public execution of the student and the unfaithful wife for breaking up a marriage. The husband tried to stop the excesses by calling on netizens to cease the attacks and by joining his wife and the student in publicly denying that an affair had taken place, but only the passing of time and the lack of further input managed to slowly defuse the situation.

An event that captured media attention worldwide but started in Chinese cyberspace happened in 2007, consisting of the discovery of widespread slavery in brick making factories in central China (Associated Press, 2007; Watts, 2007). Desperate parents who had lost their children suspected that they had been kidnapped and were being forced to work as slaves in a number of small factories in Henan province. Local authorities were reluctant to help the parents in the search for their children and in several cases refused to help even when the parents had proof of their claims. In desperation, 400 fathers joined together and posted an open letter online, asking netizens to help them recover their children and to pressure authorities into taking action. Netizens responded in large numbers and through their support and action, as well as through Western media sources that had been alerted by some of the netizens, the central government was pressured into taking direct action and into cracking down on brick making factories in a large-scale police action that ended up in freeing thousands of young Chinese who had been forced into slavery by business owners and colluding local officials.

Another incident was hardly noticed by Western news media, but created quite a stir in Chinese cyberspace in 2007. It concerned the public misbehavior of Chinese individuals who were subsequently condemned by the online community and punished through at times extreme harassment. This was the story of Beijing Boy, a video about students of an Art school in Beijing whose videoed antics in the classroom met with intense criticism online after being uploaded to various video websites, among them YouTube and its Chinese counterpart Tudou. The uploaded video shows two male students physically attacking a teacher during class while about half of the other students are cheering them on and the teacher tries to continue his lesson. Netizens identified both the school and all the students involved within days and began a harassment campaign that only died down after both CCTV 1 and CCTV 2 delivered a response from the central government asking netizens to control themselves and to calm down while the government appointed a commission to investigate the matter. One interesting aspect of this affair was that netizens repeatedly asked for an increase in government regulations and a tightening of government control over schools and student behavior. A commentator on CCTV 2, however, argued that such an increase of government control was not necessary as long as all the parties involved exercised more self-restraint.

The government was seemingly not interested in getting involved in the affair. They never moved to protect the art school in Haidian, nor the students or their families while they were being targeted for harassment. Authorities were also strangely absent when a crowd of self appointed reporters descended on the school and tried to enter the school grounds during teaching hours, and they didn't stop the reporters from harassing all who entered or left the school campus. Netizens were lobbying for an increase in government control over education and over the behavior of both teachers and students, but the official answer given via CCTV was to ask for

more individual responsibility and self-restraint while arguing against the need for stricter government control, both on the Internet and in real life.

Finally, two cases involving foreigners have to be mentioned here – one in which a foreigner became the target of Chinese vigilantes after blogging about his sexual conquests in Shanghai, the other a traffic incident in which a Western woman stopped a car driver from entering a bicycle lane in Beijing. The Western woman had an altercation with the driver during which the Chinese man forcibly removed her bicycle from the road. The Western woman did not back down, however, and retrieved her bicycle to continue to block the car's entry into the bike lane. The event, like many others would not have been remarkable, except for the fact that a bystander had pointed his mobile phone at the developing situation and uploaded the resulting photos.

While the photos show numerous Chinese bystanders who looked on but did not interfere in the scene to either support the Western woman or the Chinese driver, the reaction online was very different. Chinese netizens were outraged at first that a Western woman had dared to tell a Chinese man how to behave in his own country, but this impulsive and nationalistic reaction changed soon to at first include and later on focus solely on criticizing the Chinese man in online debates. Netizens accused him of having embarrassed the entire Chinese nation, of having lost face for China, and wondered why a country with a 5,000 year history kept producing such uncultured people. As the debates gathered steam online, netizens used the partly visible number plates in the photographs to track down the driver, and soon the driver's name and his personal details, including his phone numbers, were published online, at which point the online community started harassing him and his family, until he publicly apologized for his behavior and for having shamed China.

The foreign woman in the pictures was never identified, nor did anyone try to track her down or to involve her in the debates. The driver's apology that the online community forced him to make was also not directed at her. The driver did not apologize for having threatened the foreign woman or for having thrown her bicycle to the side of the road, but instead he apologized to Chinese netizens for having embarrassed and shamed the Chinese nation in front of foreigners.

The Western man, an English teacher with the online name of Chinabounder, had been describing his sexual conquests of Chinese girls in Shanghai on the Blogspot blogging service. The blog's language was highly literary and the author described his sexual encounters with numerous Shanghainese women in great detail. Additionally, he also used comments made by his female partners to criticize China, Chinese culture, Chinese politics, Chinese men, etc. on a wide range of issues, displaying a lot of detailed knowledge of China's history, which he used to defend his views against all who attempted to argue against him in comments left on his blog (Chinabounder, n.d. – The entries referred to here date to the time before September 2006).

The fact that Blogspot had been blocked in China at the time meant that he remained unnoticed by Chinese netizens for many months, although he had fast become a household name among the more technologically savvy Internet users, especially among male expatriates living in China who started chatting on- and offline about him. Once Blogspot was unblocked in China, though, this changed dramatically. Within a week increasing numbers of Chinese netizens visited the site and started venting their anger about the posts on the blog in Chinese cyberspace.

At the end of August, 2006, Prof. Zhang Jiehai, a professor of psychology at the Department of Sociology in the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, called for all Chinese to join him in a hunt of this immoral foreigner and asked for help in identifying him, so the authorities could expel him from China (EastSouthWestNorth, 2006; and Shanghaiist, 2006). The open call for help from Chinese netizens in hunting down a foreigner who was perceived as insulting all Chinese gained a lot of support on the Internet, and resulted in widespread Western media attention as well. The online hunt slowed down very fast, though, once Chinabounder appeared to have left China, and stopped blogging on his site. Additionally, expatriates blogging in China, as well

as Western media organizations, confused the issue through the publication of several conflicting claims about Chinabounder's identity and purpose in blogging. Despite Western media attention, the involvement of Prof. Zhang, and widespread online hysteria about Chinabounder and his blog in September 2006, Chinese authorities ignored the entire affair, and neither commented on it, nor took any action.

In the Chinabounder affair, as well as in several other incidents, the absence of the Chinese state is very noticeable. Although the Chinese government is often portrayed as a very totalitarian government that limits all freedoms of its people, they interfere only rarely with online debates or with online witch-hunts instigated by self-proclaimed vigilante groups who want to protect China or protect China's reputation. The Chinese government seems more than willing to allow Chinese netizens the freedom of online self-regulation.

5. OFFICIAL REACTIONS TO VIGILANTISM

In general, the Chinese state's reaction to incidents of vigilantism and the attendant increasing organization of China's online community has been characterized by restraint. The permissiveness the Chinese government has displayed towards online debates, incidents of vigilantism and the harassment of individuals has been very different from actions taken elsewhere.

While demonstrations of over-taxed or dispossessed farmers have been crushed through the application of force, while demonstrations against Japan or the USA were overseen by the police who directed demonstrators towards stones approved for throwing, and while complaints about the kidnapping and enslaving of their children by parents to the authorities were suppressed or ignored, in cyberspace there is more freedom in China. Netizens are permitted to organize themselves, to discuss problems they have with the government or government policies, and to attack and persecute others both online and in real life. There are of course cases where different levels of the Chinese government or the CCP suppress debates or activities in cyberspace – more on this below – but there seems to be a greater degree of freedom online, as the examples above show as well. Although organizations like Amnesty International point to continuing state suppression of online activities (See International Secretariat, 2004), to cause the state to react necessitates more than the expression of dissent online. Online dissent has to be coupled with other activism offline before the authorities intervene, as even the cases their report mentions show.

If a case does not have much impact in the real world, or if it is not accompanied by civil unrest in the real world, the government appears to be far more tolerant, even if bloggers start criticizing central institutions like CCTV and its daily 19:00 main news broadcast. An affair that is still on-going at the time of this article's writing is the "so yellow, so violent" debate that is currently running across Chinese cyberspace (EastSouthWestNorth, 2008; Kennedy, 2008). During a report on the depravity of parts of the Chinese Internet, CCTV showed a brief interview clip of a Beijing elementary school student called Zhang Shufan, who had surfed the Internet when a webpage popped up that she described as "so yellow, so violent" ("yellow" meaning pornographic in Chinese). Once the phrase and a short video clip had been posted online, China's cyberspace exploded with comments from outraged netizens, who at first attacked the girl for lying on national TV claiming that violent pornographic material was not usually available on Chinese websites. These attacks soon grew to include CCTV and its reporting standards, accusing them of having edited the girl's remarks to represent their own biased view of the Internet. Currently, many netizens have broadened the attacks to condemn all reporting on CCTV as biased, propaganda based, or simply as lies. So far, the government has been quiet and has not interfered with the online debates, showing much restraint despite the widening attacks on one of the Communist party's main mouthpieces.

A further interesting feature of the Chinese government's reactions is not only the measured and calm way in which the government did react to several of these instances of online vigilan-

tism. Instead of either ignoring the excitement online or curtailing it, the government also has repeatedly reacted to online demands and shown a great responsiveness to the complaints. Both in the case of the Beijing Boy, as well as in the more serious case of childhood slavery, the government monitored the discussions on the Internet and subsequently took action in accordance with the wishes of the majority of netizens. These actions were taken despite earlier official steps in the opposite direction, i.e. ignoring and suppressing the complaints of the parents. This responsiveness of the government and the party to wishes and complaints by ordinary citizens has boosted the popularity of online discussion forums in China, and has encouraged netizens to contact government departments directly via the Internet or SMS messages, which has been discussed by both Hartford (2005) in an article about the electronic mailboxes of the mayors of Hangzhou and Nanjing, as well as by Latham (2007), who outlines the ways in which emails and SMS messages interact in informal political discourses in China.

The willingness of netizens in China to interact with officials often overwhelms the government and the resources it allocates to respond to citizens (see again Hartford's paper). Whenever government departments decide to use the Internet to interact with ordinary people in China, they seem to underestimate the numbers of netizens willing to respond, which even holds true for official online sales events, such as the sale of tickets to the Olympic Games, where the government drastically underestimated the demand and the willingness of its citizens to acquire tickets online. In December 2007, when China's National Bureau of Corruption Prevention announced the launch of a new website to allow individual citizens to file complaints about official corruption, the website collapsed shortly after being made available due to the high volume of traffic it generated (*Shanghai Daily*, 2007). While this can be interpreted as a demonstration of the widespread corruption of government officials, it also shows the willingness of netizens to engage with government officials and the trust many people in China still have in their government, despite the past fifty years of Chinese history.

Official responses are not uniformly supportive of what they perceive to be online excesses, though. In a number of incidents the government moved to limit online debates to the extent of forcing blogs to shut down and asking ISPs to remove certain online forums from their servers. One such incident that the authorities were fast to suppress in China was a recent pyramid-type scheme in China's Northeast in which a company called Yilishen promised investors returns of over 30 percent per year on their initial investment if they agreed to raise ants for the company, who stated that they intended to use dried ants to produce several traditional Chinese medicines. When the scheme collapsed, enraged investors first took to the streets and then to the Internet to vent their frustrations and their anger. As Yilishen had been well-connected with local authorities throughout the area, the central government decided to suppress all reporting on the affair both in traditional media as well as online, which caused even more outrage, but meant that the topic disappeared from Chinese cyberspace while the Chinese government decided how to deal with the problem (Imagethief, 2007; O'Neill, 2007). As many local and provincial level officials, as well as a few celebrities were involved in the scandal, the Yilishen ant farming affair appeared too serious to be left to China's netizens to debate.

6. FRONTIERS OF A TRUCE – OUTLINE OF AN OUTLINE OF CIVIL SOCIETY?

Over the past two years an uneasy truce seems to be emerging between the online community and the Chinese state. This truce is still broken from time to time, but a general framework of cooperation seems to be shared between them. This framework consists of certain restraints that both sides appear to be operating under. The Chinese government presents itself as willing to allow Chinese netizens to interact freely on the Internet, as long as they regulate and police themselves and do not cause too much of a disturbance in real life. This unofficial framework, or the acceptance of the Chinese state to allow netizens this much freedom on state-owned and controlled Internet servers, allows the sketching of an outline of the limits of an online civil so-

ciety in China. This civil society in Chinese cyberspace in turn presents itself as fundamentally pro-Government and anti-chaos, is self-regulating, and often acts as a self-appointed guardian of China's reputation and its traditions, rather than being a forum for critical political debates or pro-democracy movements.

As mentioned before, there are certain topics that Internet users should not debate online – for example, Taiwan, Tibet, separatism or independence for parts of China, Yilishan, etc. – as these topics have been judged as too sensitive, and ISPs in China have been asked to block them. From time to time, terms are added to this list or taken off again, and the list itself is subject to local variations. Thus, terms like "democracy" or "corruption" were not fully searchable using Internet connections in northern China during September and October of 2007, around the time of the 17th National Party Congress during which Hu Jintao's second term as China's leader was confirmed. During the same time access to Western news sites from within China became more problematic and often only worked via proxy connections, but the restrictions were lifted again in November.

Through frequently updated blacklists that control the traffic across Internet nodes in China, the government can also prevent netizens from discussing specific current events they do not want people to know or talk about, such as mining disasters, industrial accidents, local demonstrations, etc. In these cases, the names of the involved region, city, or township are added to the blacklists until a period of calm ensues, at which point they are taken off the list again. While the blacklists do not prevent netizens from using restricted terms, they slow down or prevent connection attempts to web pages containing them. This flexible tool of Internet control allows the state to adapt to changing real-world situations with great speed, but also demonstrates that online debates that do happen in China exist with the government's passive approval (See Fallows, 2008, for a more detailed account of China's Internet censorship).

Another feature of the civil society taking shape in China's cyberspace is the online community's self-image as a responsible and self-regulating community in which different members of the community will speak out if they consider the behavior of others improper. During the course of the still on-going debates on the "Too yellow, too violent" statement, several widely read bloggers started to criticize the online community for their attacks on the primary school student who made the comment. Their criticism was instrumental in shifting the debate from its focus on the girl and her family to debates on China's Central Television and their journalistic practices.

Similarly, a number of influential bloggers turned online debates during the online discussions of the expatriate woman stopping a car from entering a bike lane in Beijing. Initially, most of the debates focused on the issue of a foreigner telling a Chinese how to behave in his own country and were extremely critical of the arrogance and colonial attitude displayed by the expatriate woman. This changed after a few days, though, and the online community condemned the Beijing driver instead, who was ultimately forced to publicly apologize for his uncivilized behavior that was now portrayed as having shamed China.

There are no explicit rules of behavior for the online community as yet, and some of the online debates can get rough in their choice of terms or the threats made against people who are then identified and whose contact details can get posted online. Limits of behavior seem to be determined by a number of highly influential and widely read bloggers whose comments can sway China's netizens to change their opinions. The exact influence of these bloggers or the power structure of the online community as a whole has so far not been researched in great detail, although some studies have been published that provide first steps in this direction (See Goldsmith & Wu, 2006; Guo, 2007; Yang, 2003).

One area where China's netizens have firm opinions is their stance on China. China's online community sees itself as patriotic and supportive of China and its future development. As a result, online debates of problem cases often turn to issues of shame and lost face. The students at the Haidian art school were not merely misbehaving teenagers, but had brought shame on China

by posting their video online. The Beijing driver confronting a foreign woman on a bike was also not a mere traffic violator, but had caused China and Chinese everywhere to lose face. The public apologies that the offenders were forced to make were not to the offended parties, but to the online community and the people in China in general who had been injured through their behavior.

These acute feelings of national pride and national shame can be found especially often on web sites where Chinese netizens interact with Internet users from other countries. Examples of such pride can be found in many of the posts on the forums run by *China Daily*, an English language newspaper published in China. Any hint of criticism of China by a foreigner attracts sustained vicious attacks by large numbers of Chinese posters, who appear to trawl the entire site for offending materials (For examples, see *Chinadaily* BBS, n.d., a-d). The attacks on non-Chinese are not restricted to sites within China, though, as the group providing the free video software Videolan found out. On their forums (Videolan, 2006) a user from mainland China complained in 2006 that one of the Asian download mirrors for the free software was located in Taipei, Taiwan, and that this gave Taiwan the status of an independent country. The Chinese poster proceeded to educate the American programmers that Taiwan was only a province of China and that they should correct the wrong impression their website created. The American programmers did not quite understand what the problem was supposed to be, and in the end, they simply stopped reacting to the posts of the Chinese netizen, and the forum thread died.

The patriotism of Chinese netizens indicates that any grassroots movement that fights for democracy in China is unlikely to develop as long as the Communist party manages to improve the objective conditions and the subjectively felt and perceived state of the Chinese economy. China's netizens approve of the strengthening of China, which means they approve of the Chinese Communist Party as long as it is improving the country both internally as well as on the international stage. China's online community wants China strong, but not necessarily democratic, especially if democracy means slower economic development. The Chinese state can obviously be pleased with this attitude of its citizens, which might explain the willingness of state officials to allow Internet users the freedom they are currently enjoying.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The Internet in China presents itself as both a very restricted and restrictive space, as well as a space in which Chinese netizens are free to debate issues that matter to them. Within the limits set by the Chinese state, Chinese Internet users can address issues with little or no interference by government officials, and even attack and persecute those who are felt to have failed to meet unwritten standards of behavior for Chinese people.

The online community is expected to regulate itself, and its members mostly discipline themselves, or are disciplined by a number of widely read and very influential bloggers. This self-regulation often prevents the need for the state to interfere in cyberspace, but it has also resulted in state officials paying attention to and following up on issues that are raised online about specific local problems. The exact nature of the self-regulation of China's online community and the source of the influence of certain bloggers deserve and are currently starting to receive closer attention among the international academic community.

The relationship between China's netizens and the state is one of mutual wariness and is subject to temporal and spatial fluctuations. It is strengthened, though, by the strong feelings of patriotism expressed by the online community, and by its current support for the general direction of the Chinese Communist Party's rule over China. This support is given on the basis of the continuing improvements the Party is delivering to China, and unlikely to waver while the economic development and international political rise of China continues.

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