

CHINA

ENEMY OF THE INTERNET



The soaring expansion of the “Participative Web” and related impact on social and political debates are making it harder each day for Chinese censors to do their job. Harsher controls and crackdowns on netizens and their online tools have been symptomatic of the regime’s increasing concern over potential fallout from Arab Spring and the Internet and social networks’ role as sounding boards.

OBSESSIVE CONTROLS TO COUNTER THE SPECTER OF ARAB SPRING

China may have the world’s most sophisticated online censorship and surveillance system, but it has been pushed to its limits to thwart any risk of contagion from protest movements, mainly by removing most references to Arab Spring and “Occupy Wall Street” movements from the Chinese Net (see the China chapter of the 2011 “Enemies of the Internet” report). Some blogs and microblogs have been shut down, and keywords¹ such as “jasmine”² or “Egypt” banned. It is now impossible to use the word “occupy” followed by the name of a Chinese city (ex. : “Occupy Beijing” (占领北京) in a Web search.

The Chinese Communist Party’s plenary session officially devoted to “cultural reforms” was in reality an occasion for the government to legislate again on Web censorship³. The CCP adopted a directive aimed at preserving “security” and expanding the Chinese culture’s “influence.” These repressive measures were justified by the need to maintain a “healthy Internet”⁴ for future generations. The law that prohibits the spreading of “rumors”⁵ actually serves as a pretext for the Chinese government to muzzle dissident voices and indulge in arbitrary arrests.

1 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2004/08/the-words-you-never-see-in-chinese-cyberspace>

2 <http://breningstall.typepad.com/breningstall-on-typepad/2011/03/what-a-beautiful-jasmine-by-hu-jintao-and-the-confucius-institute.html>

3 <http://en.rsf.org/china-respect-for-free-speech-continues-27-10-2011,41303.html>

4 <http://en.rsf.org/china-how-china-pursues-its-internet-31-08-2011,40884.html>

5 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/10/rumors-are-a-cancer-that-threatens-the-internet-and-society/>

6 <http://en.rsf.org/china-arrests-trials-and-sentences-offer-26-12-2011,39918.html>

7 <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-barometer-netizens-imprisoned.html?annee=2012>

8 <http://en.rsf.org/china-liu-xiaobo-last-year-s-nobel-peace-07-10-2011,41150.html>

9 <http://blog.boxun.com/hero/chenxiwenji/>

The regime has also required public Wi-Fi access providers to install extremely expensive Internet user tracking software. In addition to reinforcing their control of Internet traffic, the authorities are now imposing a form of economic censorship by forcing cybercafés to stop offering Wi-Fi access if they cannot afford the software.

INVITED TO “HAVE TEA”...

... which is actually a euphemism for being summoned to the police station, for censorship is now being combined with waves of blogger and netizen arrests⁶. Arbitrary detentions, unfair trials, repressive regulations and harsh sentences have recently multiplied, taking special aim at cyberdissidents. Seventy-eight of them are still in jail for their online activities, making China the world’s biggest prison for netizens⁷. Its victims include :

- Nobel Peace Prize winner **Liu Xiaobo**, who is still behind bars⁸ ;

- Cyberdissidents **Chen Xi**⁹ (陈西) and **Chen Wei**¹⁰ (陈卫), respectively sentenced to 11 and 9 years for “subversion” ;

- Cyberdissident **Li Tie**¹¹, who received a 10-year sentence for subversion ;

- **Li Xianbin**¹², sentenced to a 10-year term for “inciting subversion of the government” ;

- Human rights activist and cyberdissident **Govruud Huuchinhuu**¹³, beaten while in detention ;

- **Lawyer Ni Yulan**¹⁴ (倪玉兰) and her husband **Dong Jiqin** (董继勤), awaiting sentencing ;

- **Netizen Hu Di**¹⁵ (胡荻), forcefully interned in a psychiatric ward.

Those released, such as **Ai wei wei**¹⁶, **Wang Lihong** (王荔蕻), **Zheng Yichun** (郑贻春), **Ding Mao** (丁矛), **Ran Yunfei** (冉云飞), **Wang Yi**, **Chen Guangcheng**¹⁷ and **Hu Jia**¹⁸, are often victims of persecution, subjected to constant surveillance and even placed under house arrest¹⁹.

10 <http://blog.boxun.com/hero/chenwei/>

11 http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc_news?disp3_1205402982_text

12 <http://en.rsf.org/china-cyber-dissident-gets-heavy-jail-25-03-2011,39885.html>

13 <http://en.rsf.org/china-inner-mongolian-cyber-dissident-03-10-2011,41097.html>

14 <http://niyulan.blogspot.com/>

15 <http://twitter.com/#!/iamhudi>

16 <http://en.rsf.org/china-cyber-dissident-gets-heavy-jail-25-03-2011,39885.html>

17 <http://en.rsf.org/china-activists-attacked-while-trying-to-20-09-2011,39533.html>

18 <http://en.rsf.org/china-activist-hu-jia-freed-but-kept-27-06-2011,40527.html>

19 <http://en.rsf.org/china-chinese-authorities-keep-tight-03-03-2011,39667.html>

Blogger and activist **Wen Yu Chao**, based in Hong Kong, who takes courageous pro-freedom of expression stands¹ on the Chinese Internet, has been repeatedly harassed². His Gmail account has been hacked several times and photo montages designed to destroy his reputation have been circulating on the Internet³.

The family of lawyer and human rights activist Gao Zhisheng, who has been missing since April 2012, fear the worst. In early January 2012, the activist's brother Gao Zhiyi was informed by a court notice that Zhisheng was being detained in a western Xinjiang jail. But close relatives who went to the jail were not permitted to see him.

MICROBLOGGING SITES SOAR

According to official figures, by year-end 2011, China had 513 million Internet users ; i.e., an Internet penetration rate of 38.3%. Some 356 million of them are said to access the Internet via their mobile phone, half of whom (250 million) have microblogs. The Techrice⁴ blog publishes a list of 15 of the most popular social networks, as well as their stated and likely number of users.

The microblog revolution, sharing of opinions, and increased circulation of news resulting from microblogs have led the regime to take certain measures. The police accused Chinese Twitter ("Weibo") of having a "bad influence on society." Chinese Internet leaders such as Sina Corp (which owns the Sina Weibo microblogging website), Baidu (search engine) and Tencent (owner of the QQ messaging service), agreed in November 2011 to implement the government directives on online surveillance. These businesses promised to combat online pornography, Internet fraud, and the dissemination of rumors and false reports. The microblogs had already been asked to have moderators, but that has apparently proved inadequate⁵.

Next step : Chinese authorities have been targeting anonymity on microblogging websites. As of March 16, Chinese netizens registering on microblogging sites hosted in China will be required to use their real names instead of an alias. If they do not comply, they will only be allowed to consult other contributors' microblogs, but will not be able to actively participate. The terms under which this identification system (实名制, "shimingzhi") will be applied to all platforms concerned are still unknown.

1 http://shanghaiist.com/2012/02/03/wen_yunchao_on_what_hong_kongers_ne.php

2 <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/02/13/china-activists-wife-and-son-harassed-online/>

3 <https://plus.google.com/u/0/photos/108105216183622857074/albums/5678434678170079249>

4 <http://techrice.com/2011/03/08/chinas-top-15-social-networks/>

5 <http://en.rsf.org/china-dissident-artist-ai-weiwei-22-06-2011,40513.html>

6 <http://hktv.cc/cd/hanyupinyin/?q=%E5%88%B6>

NEWS BLACKOUTS THWARTED BY SOCIAL NETWORKS

China's censorship apparatus has done its utmost to suppress reports on an uprising in the small city of Wukan⁷, in the province of Canton. The local authorities violently repressed demonstrations against farmland seizures, and following the death of their leader, thousands of citizens took to the streets to continue protesting against the expropriations and to demand justice, while also using social networks to expose their situation. The authorities imposed a genuine offline and online news blackout of the town. They blocked the keyword "Wukan" on the Internet, closely monitored "hot tweets" and removed all images and videos showing the population's demonstrations⁸ from the Sina and Tencent Weibo microblogging websites⁹. Since the villagers had managed to make their grievances heard and to rally public support, thanks to the Internet, Beijing had to agree to negotiate with them. Lin Zulian, who had led the insurgents, was appointed local Communist Party chief on January 16, 2012.

In July 2011, the Propaganda Department attempted to impose severe restrictions on media coverage¹⁰ of the high-speed train crash that occurred on the 23rd of that month in Wenzhou, leaving some 40 people dead. It ordered «all media including newspapers, magazines and websites to give priority to reports from the authorities on the positive aftermath of the train disaster." In reaction, critics rushed onto the Web and millions of comments on Weibo demanded explanations about train safety in China.

ONLINE MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGNS CONTINUE : SOME EXAMPLES

In the city of Dalian, tens of thousands of demonstrators mobilized thanks to messages distributed on Weibo opposing a chemical plant¹¹. The later was moved.

The "guardian of Lake Tai"¹², Wu Lihong, was arrested for his activism, particularly online, in denouncing pollution. He is still under close surveillance. His Internet connection was cut off, but his efforts induced the authorities to take steps to improve the lake's water quality.

7 <http://en.rsf.org/china-news-blackout-on-wukan-revolt-grip-16-12-2011,41567.html>

8 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUk-QFFnOoY&feature=player_embedded

9 <http://research.jmsc.hku.hk/social/index.py/singleSinaWeibo?id=3392260378627418>

10 <http://en.rsf.org/china-media-banned-from-covering-wenzhou-03-08-2011,40736.html>

11 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14520438>

12 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/world/asia/14china.html?pagewanted=all>

During Ran Yunfei's detention, Twitter users created a blog¹ on which they circulated English translations of the cyberdissident's writings.

A powerful online mobilization campaign on behalf of Ai Weiwei was organized to help him pay the 15.22 million yuan (about USD 2.4 million) fine imposed on him by the authorities for tax evasion. He managed to scrape together half of it through an Internet fundraiser² to which 20,000 people contributed. Many netizens posted nude shots of themselves online³ when Ai Weiwei was charged with "pornography" because of a single photo.

REGIONAL DISCRIMINATION : LOCALIZED CENSORSHIP

In response to the unrest in Inner Mongolia and Tibet, the regime stepped up its repression :

In late January 2012, a communications blackout⁴ was imposed to prevent media coverage of the authorities quashing protest movements in Tibet. The independent and foreign media were kept in the dark, while disinformation prevailed in order to hide from the world the magnitude of the protest. The Internet was a collateral victim of the crackdown, with cut-off connections⁵, increased blockings, and removals of content related to the uprisings. Local community networks⁶ were particularly targeted in order to nip in the bud any attempt at mobilizing support online. Tibetan exile media organization websites are still inaccessible, as are Tibetan-language⁷ blogs and discussion forums such as Sangdhor.com⁸ and Rangdrol.net.

The Chinese authorities' strategy of cutting off certain provinces or regions from the media and the Internet in order to subdue them in silence is not new. Tibet has already been the target of harsh restrictions on communications. Xinjiang was cut off from the outside world for several months after interethnic riots in 2009.

In May 2011, the Internet was also a victim of the crackdown on the Inner Mongolia demonstrations⁹, as the authorities stepped up their control following protests about the death of a Mongol herdsman on October 20, 2011¹⁰. Many Mongolian websites called for demonstrations against the government's attempts to impose a news blackout on the event, and access to several sites such as Boljoo¹¹, Mongolian BBS¹² and Medege¹³ were blocked as of October 27, 2011. Cyberdissident Hada and his family are still in jail, and their close relatives are being harassed.

OFFICIAL STRATEGY : PROPAGANDA, CYBERWAR AND REFUSAL TO ACCEPT ANY INTERFERENCE

Following the protests triggered in Mongolia by the death of a herdsman¹⁴, propaganda messages likely posted by government-hired bloggers known as "50 cents" have mushroomed online. One such post read : "Dear fellow students and friends, it was just a traffic accident. Some people with their own agendas are interpreting it as an ethnic problem or saying it has something to do with oil and natural gas development. The government is taking the case very seriously (...). We hope that our fellow students will not believe the rumors (...)".

The authorities are trying to have the last word : they claim to have 40,000 micro-blogs¹⁵ on which to publish "approved" news and welcome netizens' comments.

The Chinese Army has set up an elite unit responsible for thwarting cyberattacks¹⁶ according to the daily Global Times, cited by Agence France-Presse. In August 2011, McAfee security experts exposed a series of large-scale cyberattacks¹⁷ that had been occurring since 2006. Once again, China is strongly suspected. It is thought to be behind attacks against Google¹⁸. In mid-August 2011, after the self-immolation of a young monk, Chinese authorities may have also initiated a wave of cyberattacks against the Tibetan media.

1 <http://transranyf.blogspot.com/2011/07/quotations-from-ran-yunfei-part-one.html?spref=tw>

2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15694101>

3 <http://www.rue89.com/rue69/2011/11/21/tous-nus-pour-soutenir-l'artiste-chinois-ai-weiwei-226749>

4 <http://en.rsf.org/chine-tibet-cut-off-from-the-rest-of-the-23-02-2012,41930.html>

5 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/03/china-internet-links-tibetan-unrest>

6 <http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/02/03/18575/>

7 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/02/01/china-several-tibetan-language-blogsites-shut-down/>

8 <http://sangdhor.com/>

9 <http://en.rsf.org/china-internet-is-collateral-victim-of-31-05-2011,40379.html>

10 <http://en.rsf.org/chine-respect-for-free-speech-continues-27-10-2011,41303.html>

11 <http://www.boljoo.com/>

12 <http://www.mglbbs.net/>

13 <http://www.medege.com/>

14 <http://en.rsf.org/chine-respect-for-free-speech-continues-27-10-2011,41303.html>

15 http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-10/15/content_23634487.htm

16 <http://en.rsf.org/globalvoicesonline.org/2011/06/19/china-attack-on-a-netfreedom-blogger/>

17 <http://en.rsf.org/china-how-china-pursues-its-internet-31-08-2011,40884.html>

18 <http://en.rsf.org/china-cyber-censors-turn-the-screw-on-21-03-2011,39839.html>

The regime launched an offensive against censorship-circumventing software programs, which are used more and more in China, as pointed out by Global Voices¹. The Great Firewall is now thought to be capable of controlling the data flow from local IP addresses and simultaneously restricting the number of IPs authorized to connect to the international network. Multinational companies have supposedly sent internal communications to their employees instructing them not to use VPN and not to visit foreign websites unless they are related to their work.

On October 19, 2011, aware of the economic impact of Net censorship, the United States demanded clarifications concerning "Internet restrictions in China," which violate World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. The Chinese Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Jiang Yu, rejected the U.S. demand, stating : «We do not accept using the excuse of 'Internet freedom' to interfere in other countries' internal practices,» she said, adding that "The Chinese government promotes and actively supports the Internet and safeguards its citizens' freedom of expression."

While the Chinese government is not prepared to relax its painstakingly won grip on the Internet, it is increasingly overwhelmed by the immense potential of the Participative Web, and the tension between the regime and cyberdissidents is intensifying. The transition period now underway, expected to culminate in the fall of 2012 when Hu Jintao will be replaced by his successor Xi Jinping, back from an official visit to the United States², is unlikely to usher in an era of respite and – even less likely – a Chinese spring.

1 <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/05/13/china-cracking-down-circumvention-tools/>

2 <http://en.rsf.org/chine-questions-about-freedom-of-15-02-2012,41891.html>