CHINA'S DIGITAL REVOLUTION – POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

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National borders are increasingly disappearing in our globalized world. New media, such as the Internet, is speeding up these developments. Today, information can be sent around the globe in just a few seconds and accessed by the so-called "global citizen." The World Wide Web pervades our existence; the young "cyber generation" has grown up with the new technology and is increasingly dependent upon it. Thus, the "web generation" often spends more time in virtual networks than real-life ones. This does not just fuel the question of how we coped before the existence of the cell phone and the Internet, but also whether we can still keep pace with the rapid, global change without the support of the Internet as a source of information. The change to transnational forms of communication emanates from all areas of social cooperation, be it in culture, religion, the economy or politics: neither a state museum, religious community, private company, nor politician seem capable of existing nowadays without their own website.

The use of the Internet is – depending on the government – markedly different around the world. In 2008, the "Motherland of the Internet", North America, demonstrated the impressive use of this virtual, social communication platform during the United States' presidential election for campaigning purposes and political communication. This trend has also not been halted in the People's Republic of China. The country has been online since 1994. During the early years, however, only a very small proportion of the population had the privilege of using the new technology. Over the past nine years, the number of Chinese Internet

users has risen, though, by an astonishing one thousand five hundred percent.[1] Without including Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macao, the Chinese cyber population is the largest in the world.[2]

As well as censorship measures, the Communist Party of China (CPCh) has reacted to the vast number of Internet forums, blogs, bulletin boards (BBS), and chat rooms with its own "e-government" solutions – similar to those found in the West. It may come as a surprise to international observers that Internet users are able to address local politicians – and even Hu Jintao (as was the case in June 2008 on the forum of the news agency, people.com.cn) – during an online "question time." Is a digital revolution taking place within Chinese political communication? Who are these Chinese surfers? Can they influence political decisions or are they challenging the power of the Party? This paper seeks to address these questions.

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INHABITANTS OF CHINA'S CYBERSPACE

In summer 2009, China had three hundred thirty-eight million Internet users. This figure refers to users over six years old and who have logged on during the past six months. This exceeds the three hundred twelve million users of the World Wide Web in the European Union and the two hundred fifty-three million surfers in North America.

As in previous years, ten to twenty-nine year olds continue to represent the largest proportion of users. In spite of a rise in the number of users aged between thirty and thirty-nine, the Chinese cyber population has remained young. Looking at the professional backgrounds of the web community, we see that students represent the largest group (thirty-two percent), followed by employees (fourteen percent), and the unemployed (seven percent). Seventy percent of

1 | Over the same period, the number of Internet users in Germany rose by one hundred twenty-six percent. Internet World Stats, 2009, *Usage and Population Statistics.* http://www.internetworldstats.com (accessed April 20, 2010).

2 | Internet World Stats, 2009, *Usage and Population Statistics.* http://www.internetworldstats.com (accessed April 20, 2010).

the Internet population lives in urban areas; the number of rural users continues to rise – in no small part thanks to the financial and infrastructure investments of the government. Seven hundred forty-seven Million Chinese cell phone owners[3] are able to access the Internet on the move; of these, about around one hundred fifty-five do so.[4] These figures should not mask the fact, however, that the Internet's penetration rate among the Chinese population is still low in comparison to the developed world (China: twenty-seven percent, Germany: sixty-six percent, EU: sixty-four percent).[5]

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For a large proportion of the Chinese web community, the Internet serves as a means of entertainment (online games, music, videos). The World Wide Web is also used when searching for information and as a tool for communicating.

Rankings and Categories of Internet Use in the People's Republic of China

Rank	Use	Usage Rate	Category
1	Online music	85.5%	Entertainment
2	News	78.7%	Information Source
3	Sending Messages	72.2%	Communication
4	Search engine	69.4%	Information Source
5	Online videos	65.8%	Entertainment
6	Online games	64.2%	Entertainment
7	Email	55.4%	Communication
8	Blogs	53.8%	Communication
9	Forums / BBS	30.4%	Communication
10	Online shopping	26.0%	Business
11	Online payments	22.4%	Business
12	Online trading	10.4%	Business
13	Booking holidays / journeys	4.1%	Business

Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2009, *24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, 28.

3 | International Telecommunication Union, 2010, http://www.itu.int (accessed April 20, 2010).
4 | China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2009, *24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, 4 - 14.
5 | Internet World Stats, 2009, *Usage and Population Statistics*. http://www.internetworldstats.com (accessed April 20, 2010).

These statistics fuel the disappointment of some experts that the Chinese primarily use the Internet for entertainment purposes. International observers had great hopes for "China's connection" to the world's digital network. Many believed the World Wide Web would act as a "mouthpiece for Chinese society" to drive forward socio-political reforms and serve as a platform for political communication. It is correct that the average user mainly uses the Internet as a means of relaxing. Nevertheless, a large proportion of surfers use the Internet as a source of information. Over one hundred eighty Chinese Internet users actively (politically) participate – often anonymously – on blogs.[6] These statistics from the official report on the development of the Internet in China confirm this observation: more than half of all Chinese users (56.1 percent) express their opinions on virtual forums. In addition, over three-quarters of users (78.5 percent) share their knowledge with others in the web community.[7]

The enormous increase in users definitely has revolutionary potential: the "web generation" is paving the way for alternative methods of (political) exchange. In regions with authoritarian governments, anonymous blogging is often the only means to express alternative or subversive ideas. Thus, the anonymous blogger takes on a revolutionary role in preparing the way for a free exchange of ideas.[8]

Net users are very creative when expressing opinions about national politics on online forums. Often, the "chat name" they choose for themselves indicates their dissatisfaction with the government. In a country, in which the population has learned to circumvent state-controlled media, criticism is often expressed indirectly. This is done, among other things, through homemade videos, which appear on virtual networks such as tianya.cn – the largest Chinese forum – and can be accessed by over twenty million users.[9]

6 | Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet",
      Electronic Journal of Communication 20 (2010), 1 - 2.
7 | China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2009,
      24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, 43.
8 | Sunny Woan, "The Blogsphere: Past, Present, and Future.
      Preserving the Unfettered Development of Alternative
      Journalism", *California Western Law Review* 44 (2008),
      101 - 133.
9 | Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet",
      Electronic Journal of Communication 20 (2010).

THE INTERNET VS. "INTERNET WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS"

The content of the "national World Wide Web" differs considerably in socialist, authoritarian states, such as China, from the semblance of the Internet in more democratic parts of the world. The People's Republic has emancipated itself from the global network by creating an "Internet with Chinese characteristics."[10] The so-called "great firewall of

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China" denies access for users within the People's Republic to websites, which the government considers to deal with sensitive topics (e.g. Tibet and the suppression of the student protests in Tian'anmen Square in June 1989). In accordance with framework conditions of the Party, access to international media sites can be denied. Since the unrest in the Chinese province of Xinjiang in July 2009, access to international social networks, such as Facebook YouTube and Twitter, has been blocked. For creative users, these barriers can easily be overcome using proxy servers.

Alongside powerful state censorship mechanisms (approximately fifty thousand online police officers monitor user activity around the clock),[11] another important control agent of the Chinese Internet is often overlooked: the website operators themselves. The Chinese rule for Internet surveillance is: "censorship through self-censorship." Moderators regulate user threads on the most popular bulleting boards (BBS). In addition, comments are posted by people close to the government to influence the content of these virtual forums according to the Party line. Many suspect that these agents receive about fifty euro cents for each positive comment; for this reason, the are often mocked by surfers and nicknamed the "Fifty Cent Party."[12] The sharply increasing number of users, blogs, and BBS represents a challenge for the authorities in their apodictic surveillance of the "Chinese Internet." Users of the new

10 | Karsten Giese, "Challenging Party Hegemony: Identity Work in China's Emerging Virreal Places" (working paper, No. 14, German Overseas Institute (DÜI), Research Unit: Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg, 2006).

11 | James F. Scotton and William A. Hachten, eds., *New Media for a New China* (Chichester: 2010), 4.

12 | Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: 2009), 51.

media reported on the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008 more quickly than the official correspondents. Chinese officials were unable to play down the tragedy in official reports (in terms of the number of victims, for example), since large numbers of people had already received information about the earthquake via the Internet or SMS and this had spread rapidly across the country.[13]

The strict censorship controls on the Chinese web led many Western commentators to draw the conclusion that political communication "from below" is not possible on online forums. Nevertheless, China's surfers use the Internet to criticize scandals within the government. Contributions from politically engaged bloggers can inspire online debates. However, the Party's legitimacy may never be questioned. Surfers quickly face insurmountable (censorship) obstacles if they focus on topics disapproved of by Beijing, or if they attack the government directly. In extreme cases, arrest may follow a warning to a blogger from a website operator or commenter to "standardize" the content. According to "Freedom of the Press Worldwide," approximately one hundred Chinese journalists, Internet users, and bloggers were imprisoned in 2008.[14]

The Internet in the People's Republic is not just a national tool for communication as a result of the censorship measures alone. Although Chinese surfers have access to countless international news services, they prefer to visit national websites. Even before they were blocked, the Chinese counterparts to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were considerably more popular, and the search engine, Google, only received increased attention from Chinese surfers after it announced its withdrawal from the Chinese market at the start of 2010 (this was confirmed in March 2010).[15] The market dominance of Baidu (http://www.baidu.com/), a Chinese provider, remained unaffected by this.

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13 | James Scotton, "The Impact of New Media", in: *New Media for a New China*, eds. James F. Scotton and William A. Hachten (Chichester: 2010), 32.

14 | Sunny Woan, "The Blogsphere: Past, Present, and Future. Preserving the Unfettered Development of Alternative Journalism", *California Western Law Review* 44 (2008), 123.

15 | Erich Follath, et al. "Goliath gegen Goliath", *Der Spiegel*, March 29, 2010.

**FORUMS FOR POLITICAL DEBATE WITHIN THE
CHINESE INTERNET LANDSCAPE – TWEETING IN
CHINESE**

In 1999, the Internet forum, Qiangguo luntan (http://bbs1.
people.com.cn/) – moderated by the state-owned People's
Daily (Renmin Ribao) – was founded. This signaled the
beginning of a new digital era; the dynamic participation of
Chinese Internet users in political debates was introduced
(by the government). Chinese online portals, therefore,
guarantee a place for interactive (often anonymous),
political dialog, which reflects a broader spectrum of
opinion within society than the state media. Nevertheless,
the topics of discussion in these forums are still heavily
linked to the information available to Chinese surfers from
the official news agencies.

Since August 2009, the third-largest commercial web
portal in China, sina.com.cn, has operated a so-called
"miniblog" that follows a similar concept to Twitter.
Users with the Internet and cell phones can comment
on different topics. Access to the American
site, Twitter, has been blocked for Chinese
users since June 2009, shortly before the
twentieth anniversary of the student protests
in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing. The Chinese
"clone of Twitter," Fanfou, also fell victim to
Beijing's censorship. Two years after being
founded, the site was blocked indefinitely following the
unrest in Xinjiang on 7/7/2009, as reports relating to
the demonstrations in the Western province of China had
become too uncontrollable.

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The Chinese equivalents of Facebook (for example, Kaixin:
http://www.kaixin.com) and YouTube (Yoku: http://www.
youku.com) allow debate, but these are monitored by the
website operators. Entertainment and communication with
friends is at the heart of these platforms. The Chinese
version of Facebook allows people to test their IQ, view
their horoscope, find out what/who they were in a past life
and "manage", rate and contact their online friends. Users
of these sites rarely have a political agenda.

This is not true of BBS platforms; here, animated political discussions take place. The first bulletin board, Shuimu Qinghua (http://bbs.tsinghua.edu.cn/) was founded in 1995 at the Qinghua University in Beijing.[16] Debates on these communicative websites reflect transformational processes within pluralistic Chinese society: university graduates, as well as migrants, consumers, property owners, or environmentalists all champion their cause. Wu Mei defines four types of BBS:[17]

1. Mainstream BBS (operators: media and government)
2. Commercial BBS (operators: private companies)
3. Citizen BBS (operators: no commercial or state interests)
4. Campus BBS (operators: universities)

The sensitive topics, which are discussed by users on various BBS, may surprise many observers: on these platforms, web users sharply criticize, among other things, corruption, abuses of power by the authorities, and debate social problems with other members. The chance for users to dynamically and actively shape the content and appearance of Chinese bulletin boards has promoted so-called "online activism."[18] Internet access allows surfers to debate their (political) concerns interactively and through various media. Furthermore, virtual platforms or cell phones are used to organize protests. The ability to link dynamically active social groups causes problems for the CPCh. In some cases, netizen's social engagement has led to the government backing down.

After environmental protectionists used SMS messages to organize a protest against the construction of a chemical plant (and the associated health risks to the local population) on the outskirts of Xiamens in summer 2007, the government gave in to their demands and relocated the site for the plant's construction to a different region. [19] In 2003, the case of Sun Zhigang, who was beaten to

16 | Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: 2009), 29.
17 | Wu Mei, "Measuring Political Debate on the Chinese Internet Forum", *Javnost-The Public* 15 (2008), 93 - 110.
18 | Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: 2009), 2.
19 | George J. Gilboy and Benjamin L. Read, "Political and Social Reform in China – Alive and Walking", *The Washington Quarterly* 31 (2008), 143.

death by officials in Guangzhou for neglecting to carry his identity card, triggered widespread, virtual protests and was vehemently condemned by netizens. The uprising led to a revision of an outdated residency rule for urban fringe groups, such as migrants and homeless people, for example.[20] These individual instances show how contemporary, civil, online campaigns pick up on social injustices, which are become more explosive in the wake of modernization and social change within the People's Republic.

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It must not be forgotten that even in spite of all the political successes, which the Chinese Internet community has undoubtedly achieved – not least of all thanks to the use of new communications technologies – the state-controlled media still continues to exert a great deal of influence on Chinese online activism. The subject of discussion on Chinese online platforms is heavily dependent on media reports from official agencies. If certain topics are omitted from news reports, they are hardly ever picked up on blogs and BBS.

QUESTION OF POLITICAL POWER – THE PARTY IS ONLINE

The opportunity of participating in online political debates can serve the gradual establishment of a Chinese civic society. Min Jiang notes that the limited civic areas on the Internet within the People's Republic of China reflect the gradual development of values over the past three decades (industrialization, urbanization and liberalization).[21]

The CPCh recognizes the power of the Internet in promoting public opinion. Therefore, the Party seeks to include forums on the websites of the provincial, municipal and central government. In June 2008, it initiated an online chat session with Hu Jintao on the Strong Nation forum. The Chinese netizens used this opportunity to speak directly to the head of state. Internet users were required to send in questions in advance; from these, three topics

20 | Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: 2009), 30 - 33.
21 | Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet", *Electronic Journal of Communication* 20 (2010), 1-2.

were selected,[22] which the Chinese premier then discussed in real-time in the online chat room. At the very start of the interview, the server crashed because of the sheer volume of Chinese users trying to access it. The questions addressed to Hu Jintao concerning the significance of comments and suggestions by netizens for Party business are of particular note. After all, according to the Paramount Leader, these played an important role in political decision-making. At least according to official statements. It is questionable as to whether Chinese users actually have any influence over political decisions in China. Of course, it is in the Party's interest to let Chinese Internet users believe that their comments are taken into account – albeit only for so long as the Party's power is not threatened by the Internet community.

In individual cases, statements by surfers can have an influence on political decisions; an example is the reaction of Internet users to the announcement in summer 2009 for the planned introduction of pre-installed filter software (Green Dam Youth Escort) on all computers purchased in the People's Republic of China. The software, which the Chinese government "claimed" was to protect children and young people, did not just encounter international criticism because of the possibility to filter (political) content. Chinese bloggers (in national forums) rejected the imposed installation of the "Green Dam." In the face of this national and international wave of protest, the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Technology abandoned its plans, or rather postponed them indefinitely; Chinese bloggers considered this a victory.

In a society characterized by multi-media, the new media in China have undoubtedly created new areas for expressing opinions and holding political discussions; at the same time, though, they serve as a tool, through which the CPCh can exert political and social control.

THE INTERNET AS A POLITICAL TOOL FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND NETIZENS?

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22 | Transcript of Online Interview with Hu Jintao on June 20, 2008, http://www.people.com.cn/GB/32306/54155/57487/7406717.html (accessed April 20,2010).

though, they serve as a tool, through which the CPCh can exert political and social control. The tremendous increase in user numbers on the Chinese mainland has created the basis for a "digital (political) revolution." Indeed, the dynamism and speed of contemporary information transport and the modern intercommunication possibilities for Chinese users with an international audience is revolutionary. In particular, since the state-controlled media in Beijing used to serve as an important tool for propaganda. In much the same way that the increasingly consumerist lifestyle of the Chinese population seems incompatible with the Party doctrine of the CPCh, the toleration of active participation by the population in political dialog on state-run news and communications platforms is further evidence of how the Chinese leadership is able to link seemingly irreconcilable contradictions together.

It is difficult to predict how usage behavior of Chinese surfers will continue to develop. From Min Jang's point of view, it is not clear whether this generation will take the initiative using the technological possibilities available to it and address the question of social justice. There is, therefore, the danger that these digital pioneers degenerate into digital hedonistic consumers.

The "Internet with Chinese characteristics" allows its netizens just enough scope to express their concerns and to be noticed by the government. The Party's power may neither be questioned online nor through protests taking place in the real world that have been organized online. If the predominantly young "web generation" uses the Internet not just for relaxing but also to champion its civil rights, this can have – in individual cases (and mostly at a local level) – a direct impact on political decisions. They do not question of the Party's power, however; ironically, the reaction of Beijing towards netizens' charges in turn confirms the Party's legitimacy – according to Hu Jintao during his online chat session, the Party is acting for the people,[23] and, consequently, for the Internet population.

Online political participation is still in its infancy in the People's Republic of China and will continue to remain an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon during the coming years. The influence of the Internet on the formation of a Chinese civic society (or even democratization) should, on the one hand, not be underestimated. The "Chinese Internet" is in the firm grip of the CPCh, as are television, radio, and newspapers. Beijing cleverly uses the new media as its personal, political tool. The Party

23 | Ibid.

has long since recognized the danger of timeless, global, transnational and dynamic intercommunication among Chinese surfers. Karsten Giese notes: "The Internet and, in particular, its communication forums serve as a tool to concentrate common interests and develop social and political campaigns."[24]

The "great Chinese firewall" and its thousand Internet police support the Party by interrupting undesirable communication channels. Self-censorship of website operators and blog commenters indirectly leads to topics deemed sensitive by Beijing being omitted. On the other hand, it is precisely those websites operated by the CPCh, which give the population contact to politicians through live chat sessions, e-Discussions or e-Petitions, that lead to increased political awareness and consciousness within Chinese society.[25]

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Official statistics state that a large proportion of Chinese users use the Internet for entertainment purposes. The strict censorship controls of the CPCh demonstrate the Party takes very seriously those users that use the Internet as a communication platform (with a political agenda). If Beijing — as some pessimistic experts believe — were convinced that surfers only used the Internet as a means for insignificant entertainment, the censorship measures would be unnecessary. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether comments and posts by the fast-growing Chinese Internet community can still be controlled in the future.

This paper was completed on April 17, 2010.

24 | Karsten Giese, "Challenging Party Hegemony: Identity Work in China's Emerging Virreal Places" (working paper, No. 14, German Overseas Institute (DÜI), Research Unit: Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg, 2006).
25 | Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet", *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 20 (2010), 1 - 2.
26 | Ibid.