



COMMENTS FOR THE SEMINAR ON CHINA'S SOCIAL MEDIA

Daniel Sneider

Associate Director for Research

Shorenstein Asian-Pacific Research Center

March 16, 2011

I would like to offer some comments, based on my own experience over more than 30 years as a journalist and foreign correspondent and my current study of Northeast Asia, on the issue of the role of the internet and social media in social and political change.

In this regard, two inter-related issues are being discussed, particularly after the events in the Middle East:

- Can the internet and social media facilitate struggle against authoritarian regimes?
- Can authoritarian regimes turn the internet and social media to their own ends, as an instrument of social control, what one commentator calls “networked authoritarianism”.

Although it would appear to be contradictory, the quick answer given by most experts to these two questions is the same – yes.

While the internet and social media are certainly not the cause of political upheaval, there is little question that the ability of anti-government movements to organize themselves and reach the public is facilitated by the tools of communication created by the internet, not least social media as it has been a relatively less controlled space of the internet (compared to classic information sites). Just as the fax machine acted as an important technological facilitator of dissidence in the former Soviet Union – through its ability to transmit documents and circulate them – the internet can provide technological assistance to protest movements. Neither the fax nor the internet created those movements – something that is obvious but bears repeating because of the sometimes hyped discussion of the role of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in Middle East protest from Iran to Tunisia.

It is precisely because of that capacity to facilitate protest that authoritarian regimes, with varying degrees of sophistication, seek first to censor the flow of information on the internet and then to use it as an instrument of control.



The Chinese government offers the most sophisticated example of how an authoritarian government both fears and seeks to utilize the internet and social media.

In the realm of fear, I would like to cite a rather revealing article that was posted on *People's Daily* online earlier this month, and cross posted on more than 300 websites in China, that compared Google and other firms such as Facebook and Twitter, to the British East India Company, as instruments of Western imperialism coming to colonize and exploit China. As students of China know, this is a very potent, though overstretched, metaphor in Chinese popular thought. Let me quote to you from this piece:

“As an American company, Google’s enthusiasm for the politics of other nations goes beyond what is right. Recently, Google, Facebook, Twitter and other American internet giants have participated directly in the social storm that has engulfed the Middle East. They have played a key role in manufacturing social disorder, serving a role entirely inappropriate to their status...the facts have shown that Google is not purely a company, that it seeks not only to make the money of other nations, but also meddles in the political affairs of other countries. It is not just a search engine tool – it is a tool to extend American hegemony...

It can be said that today’s Google is America’s British East India Company...during the opium wars more than a century ago, the British East India Company forced open the doors of China with its own gunships, sending China into a century of chaos and leaving Chinese with a bitter history of humiliation. Today, China will not stand by and let a new British East India Company repeat the events of history.”¹

At the same time, as you know, the Chinese government has declared its intent to use the medium to its own ends. This involves everything from state run media trying to compete in this space, though that is a less than successful strategy to date, to creating their own microblogs and other outlets to spread its views. This was laid out in the white paper on the internet in China presented by the government last year. It tries to embrace what it cannot and does not want to stop for other reasons – the spread of information technology and the internet for non-political purposes. Without that the CCP leadership knows it cannot be a global economic leader and continue high rates of economic growth at home. They want to create a sense of freedom so long as it does not threaten their control of the state and the legitimacy of CCP rule.

Key to this is the assertion of ‘sovereignty’ over the internet – also the spirit of the piece I quoted above – which means keeping foreigners and foreign firms from having any significant role in the Chinese internet space. Of course that is

¹ Thanks to the China Media Project at the University of Hong Kong for bringing this to my attention.



STANFORD PROGRAM ON REGIONS OF
INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

Encina Hall - East 301 ■ 616 Serra Street ■ Stanford University ■ Stanford, CA USA 94305-6055 ■ <http://sprie.stanford.edu>

intrinsically opposed to the idea of an open internet that has been at the heart of the internet since its creation.

This ends up with interesting documents like the speech delivered last year by Yang Yanyin, executive deputy secretary of the Working Committee of Central and State Organs, about media policy. Regarding new media he says that the expansion of new media should be seen as a resource for the CCP to use for its own ends. It can be used not only to communicate policy but also to listen to feedback on policy, to mobilize the population, and to shape public opinion.

We know this is the intent of the Chinese state – what remains to be seen is whether ‘networked authoritarianism’ will triumph over the use of the internet and social media as a means of evading state control.