

Between Democracy and Development: The Impact of New Information Technologies On Civil Society in China

Guobin Yang
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Development and democracy are two overriding themes in contemporary Chinese politics. I would like to address the role of new information technologies in these two areas and some policy implications. The history of the past twenty years shows that development takes priority over democracy in China. Development is a top-down process, democratization a bottom-up struggle. Yet while development may be designed, its consequences cannot be controlled. Thus one profound consequence of China's economic development is a higher degree of political liberalization in the society. China's developmental strategies necessitate the construction of an IT infrastructure. China was officially connected to the Internet in 1994. Yet within such a short period, the social impact of the Internet can already be felt. Despite state efforts to regulate the Internet, this new technology has been embraced at the societal level and has created new opportunities and forms of political participation. Within the larger framework of engagement, therefore, US IT policy toward China should focus on three areas: support the construction of an IT infrastructure in China, develop technologies that promote political participation, and support international jurisdiction that protects citizens' rights to freedom of speech on the Internet.

DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT: AN UNEASY MARRIAGE

The twin themes of democracy and development had their roots in the May Fourth Movement of the early 20th century, when the prevailing belief was that science and democracy were prerequisites for modernization. The relationship between democracy and modernization changed after the PRC was founded. Modernization took priority over democracy. In the economic reform era, rapid economic liberalization and development opened Chinese society, impinged on politics in many ways, and put more and more pressure on the process of political liberalization. It is in this context that the Internet-centered new information technologies began to develop in China.

THE INTERNET AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

As of June 2001, China had 26 million Internet users. Although this is a small proportion of China's population, the growth of the Internet population is expected to be very fast—as recently as in December 1998, there were only about 2 million Internet users in China. Such growth has ramifications in all aspects of Chinese life, from work and education to life-style and politics. In my own ethnographic research, I have focused on the promises and pitfalls of IT for China's civil society and democratic development. The picture that emerges from my research differs from the cynical views of some other researchers. While some observers have argued that the Internet may become another tool for

authoritarian rule, my research suggests that it does not have to. In fact, in the uneven balance of power between state and society, the Internet favors society more than the state. In China, the Internet has empowered civil society in four ways.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech has been a main area of struggle between state and society in China. As borne out so clearly in the democracy movement in 1989, freedom of speech in China is about the freedom to criticize corrupt bureaucratic behavior, to hold government bureaucrats accountable to the citizens, to voice citizen complaints, to be informed about political and civic affairs, and to express one's opinions about these affairs. The state-owned media offer limited information about critical public issues and few opportunities for citizens to debate about issues.

The Internet is helping Chinese citizens to become better informed and more engaged. This is evident in the proliferation of information on the Internet, the overflow of such information into conventional media,¹ the strong interest in seeking information from the Internet, and a growing reliance on the Internet for personal expression and public discussion. According to a recent survey of Internet use in five cities, China's non-Internet users rely heavily on TV and newspapers for information, while for communication, including expressing personal views, they do not have effective channels. In contrast, for China's Internet users, although TV and newspapers remain slightly more important than the Internet as sources of information, the Internet clearly already plays a central role. More importantly, Internet users enjoy an overwhelming advantage over non-users in communication. Thus, as media of expressing personal views, 14.2 of non-users selected TV, 21.9 % selected newspapers, and 10.9 selected magazines. Added together, the percentage of non-Internet users relying on these three dominant conventional media for expressing views is 46%. This pales in comparison with 62.8% of Internet users who chose the Internet as a medium of expressing views. The same pattern holds when it comes to exchanging views with others. Of non-users, 13.9% selected TV as a medium for exchanging views with others, 14.2 selected newspapers, and 6.8 selected magazines. These numbers are insignificant compared with the 73.4% of Internet users who find the Internet to be a medium of exchanging views with others.²

POPULAR PROTEST

¹Because the Internet is fast in relaying news and information, some local newspapers in China often pick up and publish such information from online sources, thus channeling online discourse into the offline sphere. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Zhang Jing, "The Impact of the Internet Media on International News Reportage in China's Conventional Media." MA thesis. China School of Journalism, 2001.

²Guo Liang and Bu Wei, "Report on the Conditions of the Internet in Five Cities in China in Year 2000 Conducted by the Social Development Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences."

As an important component of civil society, popular protest and social movements are powerful means of resisting state power and protecting citizen rights. In China, organized protest is under strict control and routinized social movement organizations that systematically fight social injustices and political power still do not have a legitimate space for existence. The speed and relative anonymity of the Internet facilitates popular protest.

A frequent visitor to China's online bulletin boards will find that online protest has become a regular feature. Sometimes, such protest is just a more radical form of public debate. It may be an individual voice, yet on the Internet, one single voice may start a movement, even in the absence of organizational networks. There are many examples of online protest. An exemplary case was the influential protest activities surrounding the murder of a Beijing University student in late May 2000. When the university authorities attempted to cover up the case, in order to avoid possible unrest during the sensitive time of the eleventh anniversary of the 1989 student movement, the news was leaked in the university's online bulletin boards. For a whole week from May 23 to May 31, protest raged in the online bulletin boards across China. Most interesting during this period were the connections between online and offline protest, when the bulletin boards became a space for discussing strategies, making announcements about campus sit-ins, and live broadcast of campus protest activities. Faced with pressure from students across the country, the university authorities conceded to student demands for holding memorial services for the victim, compensations to her parents, and more efforts to improve campus security.

CIVIC ASSOCIATION

The existence of voluntary civic organizations outside the control of the state is an important basis of democracy. In China, civic organizations have proliferated in recent years, yet they hardly fall outside state control. Even some self-proclaimed NGOs cannot claim sufficient autonomy. Again, the Internet is proving to be an important tool for these organizations. Officially registered environmental NGOs rely heavily on the Internet to advance their causes. A growing number of web-based environmental groups have appeared in the past five or six years. They are unable to register because of the constraints of the regulative climate. Some of these groups started as virtual communities before evolving into web-based voluntary organizations. Others first organized offline and then went online. In all cases, the Internet provides a space for ordinary citizens to organize and act collectively. This was unimaginable even as recent as ten years ago.

As a new form of civic association in China, online communities are growing in number. One such community is a transnational network consisting mainly of members of the generation that came of age in the tumultuous 1960s – the “educated youth” generation. This online community is built up in one bulletin board, but it also has a chatroom and a well-designed, content-rich homepage. Apart from all kinds of information and documents about the historical experience that gave this generation its collective identity, the homepage hosts an address book of some 200 members, as well as links to dozens of homepages or bulletin boards maintained by individuals or groups of former educated youth. It is an active and broad-ranging online network. The

discussions in this community also range widely, from children's education to complaints about current social problems.

The importance of online communities should be understood in China's political context. First, despite the lack of legitimate organizational resources, large-scale social movements did indeed happen in China. Researchers have found that at times of crisis, informal social networks may be quickly turned into organizational bases for protest. In one sense, online communities are a new type of informal network. Second, compared with traditional forms of civic organization, online communities have some distinct features: they transcend geographical boundaries and overcome some of the political barriers. Thus, even if face-to-face social organization continues to be constrained, online communities may be expected to flourish. This is a new development that calls for more research.

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

The new possibilities of freedom of speech, popular protest and civic association on the Internet are enhanced by one other feature of the Internet: compared with conventional media, the Internet is a more global network. Thus Internet users in China are linked in numerous ways with the global community, including transnational social movement organizations and the Chinese diaspora around the world.

In my research, I found that Chinese-language websites and bulletin boards have flourished outside of China as well. These online spaces are connected with those within China through the cross-posting of messages and sometimes hot links. While some websites are blocked by China's public security agencies, users in China may still access them through proxy servers such as safeweb.com.

On the Internet, the Chinese diaspora around the world could communicate with users in China in many ways, for example by directly broadcasting world events and different perspectives on these events through bulletin board posting. The porous and networked nature of the Internet thus ties the global community to the different elements of civil society within China. Such interpenetration is a source of energy for China's civil society development, because it enhances information flow and weakens information control.

PROMOTING TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT, SHAPING DEMOCRACY: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

My research thus gives reason for optimism. It shows how the Internet is being used in ways that serve to strengthen Chinese civil society. Such optimism notwithstanding, the Internet faces both internal and external obstacles to realizing its full democratizing potential in China. By internal obstacles, I refer to those elements that hinder democratic participation in online communication. These are often stylistic and rhetorical in nature. They reflect the varying degree of civic consciousness among participants, as well as the nature of computer-mediated communication. They are not insurmountable barriers, however. As long as participants are willing to engage in online discussions, these discussions will function as a ground for cultivating civic consciousness. At present,

there are no signs that China's Internet users will disengage themselves from the use of the Internet.

External obstacles are mainly economic and political in nature. Economically, China has not reached a stage where the Internet may be popularized. China's 26.5 million Internet users account for only about two percent of its population. Politically, given that the state elites are wary of the politically corrosive effects of civil society and of the Internet's role in it, control will be maintained. To what extent the Internet will continue to strengthen Chinese civil society depends on how these economic and political obstacles may be reduced.

A key finding in my research is that the Internet has positive impact on civil society development in China. This finding is consistent with the findings of other social scientists on the politically liberalizing effects of China's marketization. At a general level, therefore, my finding supports the policy argument that concern with China's democratic development may be expressed most effectively through a concern with China's economic development. Policies toward China should be consistent with this guideline. US support of China's entry to the WTO was a major step taken along this guideline. Policies toward the IT sector in China should also follow this guiding principle. This means supporting the development of an IT infrastructure in China. Wary of the political implications of the IT, the Chinese government has asserted more control over its IT sector than other industries, for example, by restricting foreign investment in this sector. Such restrictions, however, may be expected to relax under economic pressure.

Direct investment is only one of many ways of supporting China's IT industry. Two other important areas merit attention. One is technological innovation that helps to protect privacy. The other is the development of international jurisdiction that protects individual rights to freedom of speech on the Internet. These two areas are related, and are of relevance not just to China but to the US and the world. They are particularly worth exploring in China's context. What kind of technology will allow individuals to freely use the Internet for political participation without fearing censorship and repression? What kind of technology may empower citizenship? What kind of international jurisdiction is needed to maintain the openness of global networks and the free flow of public information? These are some of the issues for a 21st-century Internet agenda.