China and New media: 'harmony' or power to the people?

Over the last 24 months we have seen the Chinese authorities rocked by the use of new media technologies to open up events such as the Tibetan protests, anger around the Sechuan earthquake and coverage of the Olympic Games. They have responded by easing access for journalists and allowing unprecedented powers of expression for Chinese citizens. Yet at the same time they are planning new restrictions on Internet use and they are still throwing dissident bloggers into jail.

The question asked in this essay by Polis Summer School student, Ruoshan Lin is "Are Chinese citizens aware of their enormous potential of gaining political power through new media or will they abide by the"harmonious society"?

China and New media: 'harmony' or power to the people? By Ruoshan Lin

Introduction

According to Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House, China belongs to those countries where press freedom is practically not given. The Chinese media landscape is strictly controlled by the government and the imprisonment of Chinese journalists and more recently of Chinese bloggers is severely critiqued by the democratic western media.

At the same time, China's increasing number of internet users demonstrates that more and more Chinese citizens have access to a medium that cannot be fully kept under control by the authorities. Therefore, "the internet is by some perceived as an ideal (new) platform to realise genuine deliberation." [i]

This essay discusses the possibility for Chinese citizens to gain political power through new media, despite the government's constant attempts to eradicate politically critical opinions, offline and online. First it will present the current situation of the internet and in connection with it the blogosphere in China. Then two case studies will examine the role of blogs.

"A harmonious society"

President Hu Jintao announced in January 2008 that China's internet environment needs to be "purified." [ii] This statement accompanies his idea of the construction of a "harmonious society"[iii], aimed at achieving societal balance. However, recently the term "harmony" used in the context of "a website has been harmonised" refers directly to internet censorship[iv]. The main question that arises at this point is whether the internet as a form of new media can contribute to China's democratization process.

China and the internet

Roger Silverstone states that the newness of new media does certainly not just consist of the new technologies we have, but rather implies the fact that new media can do new things, give us new powers and create new consequences[v]. The idea of new media is actually not new, since throughout history inventions such as the telegraph already gave people the feeling of the world becoming an increasingly smaller place[vi]. This essay's focus lies upon the importance of the internet for China.

As we all know the internet allows more interactivity and citizen participation than newspapers or TV, which only provide a so-called mediated quasi-interaction. This type of mediated interaction is characterized as predominantly monological[vii].

However in China, the development of the internet and this kind of interactivity is probably of even greater significance since it provides a space for Chinese citizens to express themselves better than they would be able to do otherwise via the conventional media, which are under government control. In order to comprehensively understand the role of the internet for China, one needs to have a quick look at its rapid historical development.

Year	Internet users
December 1997	620,000
December 1999	8.9 million
December 2004	79.50 million
December 2008	298 million
June 2009	330 million

The number of Chinese internet users skyrocketed from 620,000 users in December 1997 to some 338 million users in June 2009[viii]. Compared to its whole population, this number might not seem very overwhelming. However, China has already surpassed the US in terms of internet user rate. This tendency shows the internet's huge popularity in China.

At the same time one can observe the number of growing Chinese blogs and bloggers. It is for sure that more and more Chinese citizens want to express themselves online and let the world know about themselves and their thoughts.

Blogosphere

"Everyone's a publisher." This is what Mc Luhan said about the photocopier as a popular publishing instrument[ix]. The internet, as a publishing tool, offers us another fantastic way to get one's own ideas published: namely via blogs. Bloggers can be perfectly ordinary citizens who used to be passive consumers of the news and who now seize the opportunity to be both users and producers – and thus become so-called "produsers

Hence, citizen journalism is blooming although often citizen journalists are not considered professional journalists. However, in China it is rather the opposite case. The journalists and reporters that work for the state-controlled media such as the Xinhua agency or the Peoples' Daily automatically conduct self-censorship and are therefore rather unprofessional. One will only find few critical journalists who dare to practice investigative journalism in China and tell their fellow citizens and the rest of the world what really is going on in the Middle Kingdom.

Blogging is absolutely popular in China, with 23.5 percent of Chinese netizens using blogs regularly (April 2008)[x]. It should be said that blogs, for the most part, still serve as personal diaries for individuals. However, in the following two case studies we will see which role blogs have played in two rather delicate matters.

Case study 1:
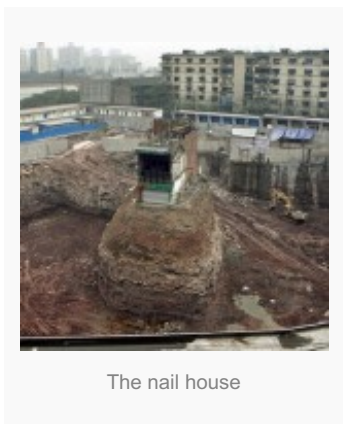
The nail house

"Stubborn nail" – a social matter[xi]

Chongqing, supposedly the biggest city in the world, is a fast-changing city, situated in the south-western province Sichuan. Property developers are eager to demolish old buildings in order to create modern skyscrapers and Chinese citizens are simply forced to move away, often with very little compensation. However, in the case of a Chinese homeowner, named Wu Ping, the property developers had to negotiate about three years with this rather stubborn Chinese woman until she got an adequate compensation. Her old house became known as the "stubborn nail" in Chinese media since the owner refused to move.

How did this incident make its way into the national newspapers and television? First and foremost, it was via blogs, written by citizen journalists. A Chinese blogger, (blogger name Zola), wrote detailed blog entries about his travel to Chongqing and how he stayed there until the very end while the "real" journalists already left when the main drama was over. He explained how he came in contact with the homeowner, Wu ping and how the story was then printed in one of the most critical papers in China, the Southern Weekly. The media hype around this issue definitely helped

attract the nation's attention to a well-known tragedy for many Chinese citizens. This case clearly shows, that Chinese citizens like Wu Ping are gradually aware of their rights as citizens and realise the power of media, particularly new media. It also reveals that there are citizen journalists who really do carry out investigative journalism.

Case study 2:

Hu Jia and his wife – a political matter[xii]

Hu Jia is probably one of the best known bloggers that has been arrested in China. Both Hu Jia and his wife, Zeng Jinyan, are committed human rights activists but they are not much talked about in Chinese media. Hu Jia's blog is a Microsoft Windows Live Spaces blog, where he used to publish and raise politically critical issues like HIV/AIDs, Tibet and the Olympic Games. His last entry was made shortly before his detention in December 2007, and just one month after he had participated in an European parliamentary hearing on human rights in China via webcam. This is said to be the trigger for his arrest. In the end, he was sentenced to 3.5 years jail for libelling Chinese political and social systems.

This rather sad case shows how threatening a blog apparently can be to the Chinese government. Hu Jia was certainly in possession of some political power through his blog. Of course, his blog and his wife's blog have been "harmonized" by the authorities since these blogs would only lead to societal imbalance in the Chinese government's point of view. Hu Jia's case demonstrates that he definitely was able to gain political power but at the same time it also shows that his power was easily taken away from him by the government.

Conclusion:

The "stubborn nail" case was partly a success since Wu Ping got a better compensation through the help of new and old media than she would have got in the first place. It is to observe that social issues in China are nowadays more acceptable and debatable than it used to be in the past. However, in political issues, as in the "Hu Jia" case, the government will always make sure that certain individuals do not get an influencing amount of political power via new media.

As already mentioned, China is the country with the greatest number of internet users. Its future internet market can still hugely be augmented. Will the Chinese citizens get more and more aware of their potential political power through the internet? Look   at the large amount of young people sitting hours in Chinese internet cafes in order to play online games, or check up the rising e-commerce rate that indicates Chinese desire for consumption and not for political reform! It seems quite clear that it will probably take a long time for Chinese citizens to fully realise their potential political power and aim for a harmony that does not require the violation of human rights.

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[i] Radical Pluralism and Free Speech in Online Public Spaces: the Case of North-Belgian   Extreme Right Discourses, by Bart Cammaert,

[ii] http://www.chinapost.com.tw/international/113390.htm

[iii]http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/10/11/AR2006101101610.html

[iv] http://www.yangfan.net/blog/flickr_blocked.htm

[v] New media and society: What's new about new media? by Roger Silverstone

[vi] Dr. Orgad's lecture: What's new about new media?)

[vii] Thompson: The new visibility, p. 33

[viii] http://www.cnnic.cn/en/index/0O/06/index.htm

[ix] [ix] Gatewatching intoduction, Chapter 1

[x] http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/18838.asp

[xi] Case study 1

http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?
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http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-04/03/content_842221.htm

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[xii] Case Study 2

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Pictures and further sources:

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