

The Internet

BREACHING THE GREAT FIREWALL

CHINA
BALANCE
SHEET

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Background

- In the first half of 2008 alone, 43 million Chinese joined the Internet, bringing China's total Internet population to 253 million. The number of users is expected to reach 300 million by the end of the year, facilitated by lower access fees, which are allowing the World Wide Web to spread into rural areas.
- The Internet is a double-edged sword for a government trying to maintain control over the media—crucial for economic modernization, but providing the Chinese public with unprecedented access to information.
- The Chinese government has engaged in censorship of the Internet since the late 1990s and has devoted vast assets to create one of the world's most sophisticated communications monitoring and filtering regimes.

Current Situation

- The government uses a range of regulatory and legal tools to censor the Internet, including imprisoning Internet users who violate rules; making Internet service providers (ISPs) responsible for the activities of their subscribers; and constructing a system of high-tech Internet controls (dubbed “the Great Firewall” by critics), which blocks access to prohibited sites and filters e-mail and site content.
- The State Council Information Office and the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department determine what substantive content should be censored. The Ministry of Information Industry, Ministry of Public Security, and State Secrets Bureau among them employ an estimated 50,000 Internet police.
- The government has consistently blocked access to Web sites addressing controversial topics such as Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen, and Falun Gong, as well as the sites of foreign news organizations, health organizations, and universities. A 2005 Harvard University

study found that of approximately 8,000 tested Web sites, 25 percent were inaccessible. Official media reported that from April to September 2007 the government blocked over 18,400 Web sites, claiming that half contained pornography and the rest were unregistered.

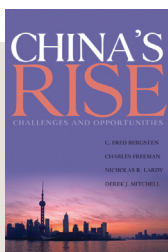
- Despite claims by Chinese authorities in February 2006 that Internet controls exist to prevent the promotion of “harmful” subjects like pornography and terrorism, observers estimate that there are some 50 “cyber dissidents” currently in detention for posting information on the Internet critical of the Communist Party.
- Nearly one in four of China's Internet users are bloggers. A 2006 Harvard study found that 61 percent of blog posts contained “some form of criticism.” The authorities are paying close attention and responding to the views expressed by China's increasingly vocal “netizens.”
- There are over 60 sets of government-issued Internet regulations. One of the most sweeping is “Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services,” which limits news Web sites in such a way as to possibly eliminate many individual or small news sites and limit Internet news to government-sponsored news.
- China has devoted enormous resources to e-government since the late 1990s (\$121 billion by 2003)—aimed at improving government efficiency, transparency, and accountability, as well as increasing supervision by and consultation with the public. A 2006 University of Wisconsin analysis of 29 Chinese government Web sites found that 93 percent provided access to laws and regulations; 41 percent offered information on public contract bidding; 44 percent had an “accusation box” to report official corruption; 20 percent had a “grievance box” to report official abuse of power; 27 percent offered discussion forums; 72 percent had a governor or mayor's mail box; and 45 percent conducted public opinion surveys.

CHINA'S CYBER DISSIDENTS

- There are an estimated 50 “cyber dissidents” currently in detention in China.
- In July 2008, human rights activist Huang Qi was arrested and charged with “illegal possession of state secrets.” He had posted articles criticizing government relief efforts following the Sichuan earthquake. Huang previously served five years for “inciting subversion” after posting articles by exiled dissidents about Tiananmen.
- In June 2008, Zeng Hongling, a retired teacher in Sichuan was arrested and charged with “inciting subversion of state power” for publishing on overseas Web sites three articles that criticized her school’s poor construction.
- In May 2008, Chen Daojun was detained and has since been charged with “inciting splittism,” mostly likely for publishing an article following the Tibetan protests declaring respect for the Tibetan people and defending their basic rights, while condemning the Chinese government’s crackdown on protestors.
- In May 2008, journalist Qi Chonghuai received a four-year prison sentence for “fraud and extorting money.” He was arrested after posting an article about Communist Party corruption in Tengzhou on a forum on Xinhuanet, the Web site of the official Chinese news agency.
- In April 2008, leading HIV/AIDS activist Hu Jia was sentenced to three and a half years for “inciting subversion of state power” after publication of five articles on overseas Web sites and acceptance of two interviews by overseas media outlets.

Implications

- Chinese censorship has the potential to create barriers to the free flow of trade and thus undermine the Chinese government’s strategy of exploiting the Internet’s potential as a key driver of economic growth.
- Despite significant restraints on online political discourse, the blogosphere, composed of an estimated 60 million bloggers, is helping foster social change. The Internet is contributing to political liberalization in China as the leadership is using the new media as a channel through which to increase public participation in government and starting to pay more attention to public opinion.
- However, the government has thus far been able to control the political potential of the Internet and will continue to do so in the short to medium term, primarily due to controls that demonstrate the state’s flexibility in responding to the rapidly changing technological environment (including built-in incentives for self-deterrence and self-censorship) and trends that promote the commercialization (and not politicization) of the Internet.
- In the long run, however, the scale of China’s information technology modernization would suggest that time is not on the side of the government.
- In conclusion, the Internet, despite hopes to the contrary, will probably not bring rapid “revolutionary” political change to China; instead, it will be a key pillar of China’s slower, evolutionary path to increased political pluralization and “democracy with Chinese characteristics.”



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

SEE CHAPTER 4: “BREACHING THE GREAT FIREWALL? BEIJING’S INTERNET CENSORSHIP POLICIES AND U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS,” IN *THE CHINA BALANCE SHEET IN 2007 AND BEYOND* & CHAPTER 3: “CHINA’S DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION: DEMOCRATIZATION OR DISORDER?” IN *CHINA THE BALANCE SHEET: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW NOW ABOUT THE EMERGING SUPERPOWER* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, BATES GILL, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL