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Google.cn & Beyond: Politics of Digital Media

March 25, 2010 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

By Silvia Lindtner

A bit more than two months ago, on January 12, 2010, Google released an official statement on its corporate blog that described the company's plan to push back over censorship of search results on Google.cn. The following is [an excerpt from that statement](#), which was inspired in large part by sophisticated cyber attacks against Gmail users that originated from within China:

In mid-December, we detected a highly sophisticated and targeted attack on our corporate infrastructure originating from China that resulted in the theft of intellectual property from Google. However, it soon became clear that what at first appeared to be solely a security incident—albeit a significant one—was something quite different ... These attacks and the surveillance they have uncovered—combined with the attempts over the past year to further limit free speech on the web—have led us to conclude that we should review the feasibility of our business operations in China. We have decided we are no longer willing to continue censoring our results on Google.cn..

Reactions to the blog entry, which was entitled "A New Approach to China," were numerous, taking the form of online commentaries (e.g. [Barmé](#), [Chow](#), [MacKinnon](#), [Martinson](#), and [Wu](#)), magazine and newspaper articles (e.g. [Eckert and Buckley](#), [Kynge](#), [Johnson and Dean](#), and [Segal](#)), and even a segment of "Fresh Air" on NPR.

Discussions that followed the blog post were consumed by debates over the ramifications of the announcement, not just for China but also for the American IT industry, global markets and international relations. Topics ranged from speculation over Google's "true" motives to discussions over class differences in the usages of Google.cn in China. In the weeks after the announcement, the various conversations evolved into a debate over conflicting values, notions of politics, and approaches to ethics. On January 21, for example, Hillary Clinton delivered a speech on Internet freedom at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. In that speech, the secretary of state added a new freedom to Roosevelt's 1941 list of four: the freedom to connect. As she put it, "The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly in cyberspace." She also emphasized the importance of information flows, explaining that "historically, asymmetrical access to information is one of the leading causes of interstate conflict. When we face serious disputes or dangerous incidents, it's critical that people on both sides of the problem have access to the same set of facts and opinions."

The response from the Chinese government and media was quick and referred to Clinton's speech as merely the latest expression of US "information imperialism." Foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu stated that China's regulation of the Internet was in keeping with "national conditions and cultural traditions."

What we see here is how easily discourses about technology and politics can become intertwined. As Internet and communication technologies broadly often become main actors within larger processes of globalization and networked social and political practices, specific technology sites such as Google.cn can become the melting pot of conflicting values in the design and implementation of these large-scale border-crossing infrastructures. This became a topic of broader discussion yet again earlier this week,, when Google began redirecting Google.cn traffic to its servers hosted in Hong Kong. Accessing Google.cn now automatically redirects users to Google's Hong Kong-based website, Google.com.hk. Reactions spilled again quickly into press coverage and blogs, many of which are emphasizing the rising political stakes and global ramifications (e.g.: [China Digital Times](#), [The Associated Press](#) via [Google News](#), and [The Wall Street Journal's Market Beat Blog](#)). [The New York Times](#) quotes Xiao Qiang, founder and editor of China Digital Times, who comments that "China's leader once saw the Internet as having both political and commercial uses that balanced each other to a degree. But increasingly they see it as a political space."

Usage of digital media for the expression of values and opinions, however, is by no means reserved to political leaders and public figures like Hilary Clinton and Ma Zhaoxu alone, as often imagined in these recent discussions around Google.cn. Rather, a range of digital media and websites are used by

diverse participants in the digital media scene to form collectives around topics of their passion. Here the line between “serious use,” such as politically motivated action, and leisure and entertainment often blurs.

While this is not unique to China, the role of new Internet and communication technologies (ICT) in China is a particularly illustrative example of broader debates over technological development and its social impacts. While Internet access across China’s cities and rural areas continues to increase, stories of digital censorship pervade international news coverage. State media in China, on the other hand, often discuss digital media such as bulletin boards, online games, and social networking sites (such as Twitter and Facebook) as an unsafe place that fosters crime, immorality, and addiction. The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), for example, calls the IT industry a double-edged sword — speaking of the potential of the IT industry for economic growth while also cautioning its users. The narrative of Internet addiction and social instability has become tightly linked to mechanisms of controlling the IT industry. This manifested in a series of interventions ranging from the operation of the great firewall of China to the demolition of privately owned Internet cafes. On the one hand, the spread of access to information and communication technologies across China’s rural and urban areas tends to be associated with economic growth, social development, and democratic change. On the other hand, information control and local Internet policies in China are often used for political statements of alienation and difference, as the Google.cn case makes so evident.

As the design and use of technologies become tightly interwoven with politics and the expression of “core cultural” values, one of the most pressing questions might be: who are the various stakeholders that participate in the making of not just the technologies and infrastructure, but also the crafting of ideas about their broader meaning and intended use? How do technologies become valuable and meaningful to the diverse actors involved and within a broader social whole and on a global stage?

In what follows, I will begin tackling these questions by drawing from my own experiences and observations made while doing ethnographic research on digital media and youth culture over the last three years in China. During the early stages of my research in 2007, I had focused on migrant youth who, through a mix of online gaming, online networking and face-to-face exchange with like-minded peers in Internet cafes, established a wide network of trustworthy friends; an invaluable resource for many upon their move to an unfamiliar city. Last summer, I revisited a series of Internet cafes in Beijing and Shanghai where I had worked with these youths. I found that the majority of these cafes had vanished, often as part of larger and nationwide projects of urban renewal and economic change with which sites of Internet access become deeply intertwined. Expansive urban renewal is one of the visually most astounding transformations in China. For example, prior to the Olympic Games in 2008, 5 million square meters of residential housing were slated for demolition in Beijing, which meant relocating 300,000 households (around 1.1 million people) and drastic changes in the urban landscape (Chau 2008). The changing IT landscape of China, and foreign IT businesses moving in and out of China, then, is embedded within a broader context of continual transformation of urban and economic infrastructure.

Where Internet cafes and low-income neighborhoods in key city areas are being torn down and moved elsewhere, what is being built in their place? A common image that comes to mind are new architectural icons such as the CCTV building, headquarters of China Central Television in Beijing, designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. On February 10, 2009, the last day of the Chinese New Year celebrations, Koolhaas’ five-star hotel, built adjacent to the CCTV building, bursts into flames. *The New York Times* reports the same day that images of the burning hotel had been immediately removed from China’s main Internet portals.



image source: <http://www.schneiderism.com/>

Changes to the urban landscape, enmeshed in the politics of renewal and modernity, also shape the everyday use of technology. For example, China's Internet scene thrived with images and re-interpretations of the burning building, such as stories of space invaders and dragons taking over the city, displaying a reaction of both gloominess and mockery (see images below). Similarly, when the release of an important game upgrade for the American online game World of Warcraft was delayed by the local distributor of the game in China in 2007, I found that many young game players took action. Several youth groups set up their own game servers using pirated versions of the American game software and their own hardware infrastructures. Some of them invented new payment systems for these so-called "private servers," around which, over time, a system of informal exchange and a sense of a strong social network and collective evolved. While official statements had justified delays of the software release and changes to game graphics with the argument of aligning these actions with core culture values such as the creation of a harmonious society, many of the youth I worked with commented that they considered these justifications old-fashioned and not reflecting their own understanding of these new media (for a detailed discussion of this topic see also work by Golub and Lingley 2008, or one of my own articles on this topic Lindtner et al. 2008).

In summary, what I would like to emphasize, here, is that, while most of the current attention is put on the conflict between Silicon Valley's branding of free and open information access and the values of a changing nation state, we are better not to overlook the many other sites of action and voicing of opinions that emerge alongside and underneath.

A couple of days ago, activist and artist [Ai Weiwei](#), who [has been using digital media](#) such as Twitter and blogging for his activism, challenged Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey in a discussion sponsored by [readwriteweb.com](#), centering around the question of why Twitter doesn't provide its users a Chinese-language version. Dorsey replied that it's a matter of time and mostly a technological issue.

While Google might be seen as leaving China, might other American companies benefit? (See [here](#) for a discussion of the potential benefits for Microsoft.) Reactions by netizens and youth and actions taken by internationally acclaimed artists like Ai Weiwei alike evidence how a range of new media and Internet technologies, connected through the social processes that sustain them, are gaining value through several processes at once: they are used for fun, gossip, business, entertainment, politics and activism. What we see here is that state and political leaders are not the only participants in the production of values and politics through technology use. Rather it is multiple stakeholders — Internet

users, designers, and policy makers alike — who are contributing to the political stage of digital media production and consumption.



Image source: <http://www.chinadigitaltimes.net>

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