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Online Activism

Abstract

Online activism is a new form of popular contention in China. In some cases, the Internet serves to mobilize street protest. More often, protest takes place online. The most common forms include online petitions, the hosting of campaign websites, and large-scale verbal protests. The most radical is perhaps the hacking of websites. These forms of contention may be found in blogs, Internet bulletin boards, online communities, and podcast and YouTube-type web sites.

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Online activism

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Online activism is a new form of popular contention in China. In some cases, the Internet serves to mobilize street protest. More often, protest takes place online. The most common forms include online petitions, the hosting of campaign websites, and large-scale verbal protests. The most radical is perhaps the hacking of websites. These forms of contention may be found in blogs, Internet bulletin boards, online communities, and podcast and YouTube-type web sites.

Online activism first appeared in China in the late 1990s. Over the years, despite tight political control of the Internet, it has become more frequent and influential. Why?

It is useful to begin by differentiating among four types of online activism: cultural, social, political, and nationalistic. Cultural activism expresses concern over values, morality, lifestyles, and identities. When in 2003 Internet users (or “netizens”) debated a provocative blog that a young woman who called herself Muzimei posted about her sex life, they were engaged in cultural activism. Social activism focuses on such problems as corruption, environmental degradation, and the rights of disadvantaged groups. In an influential 2003 case, the death of a migrant in Guangzhou City provoked widespread cyberprotests that resulted in the cancellation of an outdated regulation on urban vagrancy. An influential 2007 case exposed the criminal abduction of teenagers into slave labor on illegally operated industrial kilns in Shanxi Province.

Although cultural and social activism are also political in important ways, I single out specifically political activism as a distinct type in order to stress its oppositional nature. Online political activism focuses on human rights, political reform, and other issues that touch directly on how China is governed, by whom, and on what basis. Charter 08, the recent online petition calling for democratic reform, is a leading example of such activism.¹ Finally, there is online nationalism, which stands out by virtue of its frequency, scale, and impact. Nationalistic protest in cyberspace often involves large-scale online mobilizations and the use of radical tactics such as “hacktivism.” In some cases, street demonstrations may also be involved.

Technological developments and social changes have combined to make online activism more widespread and prominent. China received its first Internet connection in 1994. By December 2008, the number using the Internet had reached 298 million, or about a quarter of all Chinese. The underside of China’s economic development, including the socioeconomic polarization, pollution, corruption, and rights violations that have gone with it, provides the grievances that motivate activists, both online and offline.

Yet online activism in China also depends on several specific conditions. The first is the existence of a fledgling civil society of grassroots civic groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and—most important of all—online communities. Civil society groups flourished in the 1980s, but then suffered a setback with the repression of student protests in 1989. Since the mid-1990s, however, they have revived, expanded, and taken on new features such as relative administrative and financial autonomy from state agencies. Officially registered civic organizations numbered 360,000 at the end of 2006; estimates put the actual

number at about three million.² As in other countries, Chinese civil society groups actively use the Internet in order to share information, educate the public, organize events, and mobilize friends and followers. A survey of 129 such organizations that I conducted in 2003 found that 106 of them (or 82 percent) were connected to the Internet and 69 (65 percent) had their own websites.³ The growing connectivity of these civic groups facilitates their activities.

Online communities, an important new form of civic association, are where the action is. They encompass numerous types, and many are predominantly spaces for play and socializing. Anonymity can make senseless verbal attacks easier, but it also allows netizens to express themselves more freely than usual.⁴ Yet Chinese online communities have diverse functions. Play is mingled with politics. Online debates and protests about social and political issues abound. Besides general-interest communities, there are numerous special-interest online communities, such as websites run by Chinese Catholics and Protestants, gay-oriented web sites, scholarly communities of neoleftist or liberal intellectuals, and sites dedicated to various charitable and poverty-alleviation efforts. There are also many sites and blogs devoted to exposing social ills and fighting for citizens' rights as consumers or as workers who deserve protection from discrimination in the workplace.

One reason why contentious activities thrive in online communities is that controversy is good for business—disagreement raises interest, and with it, site traffic. Within limits, websites encourage users to participate in contentious interactions. Some sites strategically promote and guide controversial discussions in order to generate traffic. Behind this business strategy of promoting user participation is the logic of nonproprietary social production in today's Internet economy.⁵ Internet consumers are Internet-content producers too. When they post on message boards, write blogs, upload videos, or protest online, they contribute directly to the Internet economy.

Chinese Internet users are active and prolific content producers. A January 2008 nationwide survey shows that about 66 percent of China's 210 million Internet users have contributed content to one or more sites. More than 35 percent indicated that in the past six months they had either posted or responded to messages in online forums. About 32 percent had uploaded pictures, while 18 percent had uploaded films, television programs, or other video materials.⁶

A third important condition is the creativity of Chinese netizens. Generally speaking, netizens try to stay within legal bounds and refrain from directly challenging state power. As skilled observers of Chinese politics, they understand which issues allow more leeway for discussion, and when. To a certain extent, the four types of online activism reflect netizens' strategic responses to the political opportunities for pursuing different issues. If the cultural, social, and nationalist varieties of activism online are more widespread than political activism, that is partly because the former types enjoy more political legitimacy. As in street protests, cyberprotests directly challenging the state are much more constrained than those that can be based either on existing laws or else on claims about justice and morality that do not touch directly on questions of state authority.⁷

Even so, keyword filtering, site blocking, and other means of watching and controlling what people do online pose constant challenges for Internet-based activists. In response, Chinese netizens have developed ingenious methods of dealing with Internet control. Some people run multiple blogs or use overseas servers to host their sites. Others use chatrooms for "secret meetings." Many know how to use the versatility of the Chinese language to create characters that easily beat the best filtering technologies.⁸ Consequently, as political

control of the Internet becomes more sophisticated, so do forms of resistance. Chinese netizens' creativity renders government control of the Internet only partly effective.

Does online activism matter? It has undoubtedly induced changes in the behavior of the state by undermining information control and creating social pressure for more government transparency. As a new source of public opinion and citizen mobilization, it has often led to policy changes. Perhaps more important, online activism is directly linked to changes in citizens' attitudes and behavior toward power. On 13 January 2008, the popular *Southern Metropolis News* carried a story bearing the subtitle "Don't Even Think About Deceiving Netizens." Referring to the many cases of online activism in 2007, the story argued that in the Internet age netizens will no longer let themselves be deceived by anyone, because "suppression and deception will only strengthen netizens' desire to express themselves."⁹ These changes in citizens' political attitudes and behavior are not sufficient for democratization, but at the same time they are essential aspects of any process leading to it.

Guobin Yang is an associate professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College, Columbia University. He is the author of *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (2009).

NOTES

1 See Perry Link, trans. "China's Charter 08," *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2009. See also *Journal of Democracy* 20 (April 2009): 179–82.

2 Gao Bingzhong and Yuan Ruijun, "Introduction: Stepping into Civil Society," in Beijing University Civil Society Research Center, *Zhongguo gongmin shehui fazhan lanpi shu* (Blue book of civil society development in China) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008).

3 Guobin Yang, "How Do Chinese Civic Associations Respond to the Internet? Findings from a Survey," *China Quarterly* 189 (March 2007): 122–43.

4 In recent years, Chinese mass media have often condemned "Internet verbal violence," although such condemnations are often meant to provide the pretext for calls to tighten Internet control.

5 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

6 China Internet Network Information Center, "Survey Report on Internet Development in China," January 2008; available at www.cnnic.net.cn/en/index/index.htm.

7 Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sun-belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Elizabeth J. Perry, "Chinese Conceptions of 'Rights': From Mencius to Mao—and Now," *Perspectives on Politics* 6 (March 2008): 37–50.

8 A hilarious example is discussed in Michael Wines, "A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors," *New York Times*, 12 March 2009; available at www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html.

9 Hu Chuanji, "Wangluo gongmin de jueqi: shui du bie xiang meng wangmin" (The rise of Internet citizens: Don't even think about deceiving netizens), *Nanfang dushi bao* (Southern Metropolis News), 13 January 2008.