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Abstract

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Abstract: The history of Internet activism and Internet control in China is one of mutual adaptation between citizen activists and party authorities. The party-state initially reacted to Internet activism with alarm, but has since built a comprehensive approach combining repressive policing with gentler methods of social management. This approach has evolved in response to the diverse forms of and participants in Internet activism. But the adaptability of the Chinese Internet control regime does not mean that it will root out Internet activism. On the contrary, Internet activism will continue to grow and will itself adapt to the changing forms of control. Comparisons with Russia and the United States highlight how political economy, history, and everyday practice shape the forms of Internet activism and control.

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Internet activism is one of the most important forms of citizen activism in China. It refers broadly to claims-making contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet; and its vitality in China derives from its diverse forms, ranging from oppositional dissidence to cooperative community action. First appearing in the mid-1990s, when Internet penetration was still low, Internet activism has since gathered great momentum and currency. The Chinese party-state initially reacted to it with alarm; but over the years, the party-state has cultivated an approach that combines repressive policing with gentler methods of social management. And far from being static or monolithic, the Chinese Internet control system has evolved in response to changing forms of Internet activism. Meanwhile, Internet activism has itself evolved in response to the new forms of state control. The resilience and adaptability of Internet activism have ensured that the movement will continue to grow despite state efforts to disrupt it.

This story of mutual adaptation is rooted in deep structural and institutional conditions. Internet ac-

tivism emerged as part of the "polyphony of conflict and contention" in reform-era China.[1] Its underlying causes are the conditions of social dislocation and polarization, social injustices, and the rampant abuse of power among government officials. New communication technologies provide a vehicle for Internet activism, but the root causes of contention are structural and institutional more than technological. For this reason, the Chinese leadership must contain Internet activism in order to prevent it from aggrandizing the structural problems. But for the same reason, government efforts to suppress Internet activism – aimed as they are at only expressions of discontent – would be futile without resolving the deeper causes. This is the double bind facing the Chinese regime, and it is in the hopes of resolving this dilemma that the regime has in recent years modified its methods of managing dissent.[2]

In Chinese official discourse, *Internet mass incidents* (*wangluo quntixing shijian*) refer to large-scale protest activities that take place online. Also called *Internet incidents* in academic discourse, these contentious events take place when large numbers of postings and responses on a social issue begin to appear and circulate in major online communities, blogs, and microblogs. The messages typically mix text with digital photography and sometimes video. The online expressions are often highly emotional, with people showing either great anger or playfulness depending on the tragic or comic nature of the events. Mass media and international media cover some of the events, thereby magnifying their impact.

Although hundreds of Internet protests occur every year, the main issues focus on corruption, social injustices against vulnerable persons, and abuse of power by government officials.[3] Often, people pro-test because they do not trust official accounts of events, or because government authorities withhold information. Thus in a crucial sense, Internet protests are about politics of transparency and accountability.

The sites of Internet incidents change with the development of new technologies. In the 1990s and early 2000s, incidents took place in bulletin board systems (BBS); they next expanded to blogs; and finally moved to microblogs such as Twitter, the equivalent of which is known in China as *Weibo*. The most popular Twitter-like service in China is Sina Weibo. Since its launch in August 2009, Sina Weibo has become a favorite venue for both protest and chitchat. Its clipped 140-character format and enormous social networks make it especially hospitable to a kind of muckraking citizen journalism that is as entertaining to the consumer public as it is nettling to censorship-prone propaganda officials.

Chinese netizens have developed a rich culture of using humor, puns, and coded language to express protest and evade filtering software. *Harmonizing* an online posting means censoring it. To be *invited to tea* by the police means trouble. *Grass-mud horse* is not an animal, but the homophone of a curse word. Furthermore, seemingly apolitical issues – such as the sex diaries of a female blogger, a spoof video mocking a big-budget but unpopular film, or service blackout in online gaming communities – could also trigger Internet incidents. Although these issues attract attention more for their entertaining contents than politics, netizens invariably turn them into political discussion. In 2009, an online community of the popular computer game World of Warcraft agitated when its gaming service experienced a temporary blackout. A cryptic and apparently innocuous phrase – "Jia Junpeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat" – went viral in the gaming commu-

Guobin Yang

nity, only subsequently to be appropriated by activists as a political slogan. When an activist-blogger was later detained by the police, his sympathizers sent postcards with the phrase to the police station, petitioning for his release.

There is a growing tendency for online protests to move offline and into the street. The environmental protests in Xiamen, Dalian, Shanghai, and Ningbo in the past five years all involved intense interactions between online mobilization and offline protests. And the *Southern Weekly* protest in January 2013 is one example of how an online protest incident can spill out into the street.[4] In these ways, Internet activism both retains its own distinct features and merges into the larger trend of popular contention in contemporary China.

Digital dissidents are among the most subversive and radical activists in China. While Internet incidents typically concern issues that are permissible to the party-state for some degree of discussion, dissidents express direct political opposition and call for outright regime change. Dissident blogs and microblogs are shut down by authorities, while individual dissidents are closely watched by the state and may be subject to detention and prosecution.

Dissidents were some of the earliest adopters and remain among the most savvy users of the Internet. In 1997, on the eve of the eighth anniversary of the 1989 student protest movement, democracy activists launched what they claimed to be the first "free magazine" to be edited in mainland China and distributed by email. Its inaugural statement encouraged readers to forward the e-magazine to others, stressing the importance of the new technology for disseminating ideas: "Free and shining ideas have always existed. It is a matter of whether they can be disseminated. The reason why autocrats could seal our ears and eyes and fix our thoughts is that they monopolize the technology of disseminating information. Computer networks have changed this equation."[5]

China's best-known dissidents and human rights activists are all digitally savvy. Liu Di, known for her online ID name *Stainless Steel Mouse*, published online essays critical of the regime, for which she was imprisoned for over a year. Upon release from prison, she wrote an essay stressing the importance of dispersed online networks to the dissident community. The dissident qua Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo launched many online petitions focusing on human rights and democracy before he was arrested and sentenced in 2009. He described the Internet as a "super-engine" that enabled him to communicate with the outside world even while under house arrest.[6] Ai Weiwei, the ultimate media savvy artist-activist, maintains a highly visible dissident stance on Twitter, where he conducts his own campaigns and reports others' with a style cultivated to provoke authorities and arouse his followers.

Because of the Internet, political dissent has become more transnational and radical. With little space for political opposition inside China, dissidents reach overseas to plead their cause and seek support and visibility. Such visibility provides a measure of protection, which may then embolden dissidents to take more radical stances inside China.[7] The food safety activist Zhao Lianhai is a case in point. In September 2008, two days after his three-year-old son was diagnosed with kidney stones due to the consumption of melamine-tainted milk powder, Zhao wrote a blog calling on families to organize and fight for justice. He soon thereafter launched a campaign website; and after the site was closed down, he took his protest to Twitter. His Twitter account attracted many followers, including domes-

tic human rights activists, exiled democracy activists, and journalists from around the world. Partly in reaction to the repressive state responses he encountered, and partly because of the moral support he received on Twitter, Zhao resorted to more radical language and action, becoming engaged in more subversive issues such as petitioning for the release of Liu Xiaobo. The transnationalization of his campaign contributed to his radicalization and hastened its repression. Zhao was arrested and, in November 2010, sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for "disturbing social order."

Like digital dissidents, Chinese NGOs and grassroots civic groups were early adopters of the Internet. But unlike them, NGOs avoid oppositional politics in favor of a non-confrontational approach to advocacy and civic engagement. For them, the Internet is a platform for organizing activities, networking, and publicity.

A survey of 129 NGOs that I conducted in 2003 found that 106 of them were connected to the Internet and 69 had websites. Because of their lack of resources, small grassroots groups use the Internet more actively than resource-rich organizations.[8] This earlier, rudimentarily wired NGO community became more thickly networked in the age of social media. A 2009 survey found wide adoption of Web2.0 technologies among the 327 civil society organizations studied: over 84 percent of them use instant messaging; 70 percent have uploaded video, audio, or images online; 56 percent use online forums and bulletin boards; and 44 percent use blogs.[9]

Microblogging is the new favorite platform for NGO advocacy. Among the dozens of NGOs and NGO activists I follow on Sina Weibo, environmental and charity NGOs are the most active, using Weibo to push aggressively for environmental infor-

mation disclosure. Beijing environmental activist Chen Liwen's dogged efforts, combining legal action with online publicity to push for information disclosure about a solid waste incinerator project in Guangzhou, is one such successful case.[10]

Another popular activity on Weibo is *public interest* (*gongyi*) activism, such as social support and charity activities sponsored by NGOs or individual activists. In April 2011, the well-known journalist Deng Fei launched a "Free Lunch for Children" program by mobilizing his 1.4 million followers on Sina Weibo. The program gained widespread support and raised $4 million in eight months.[11]

Contributing to this wave of online public interest activism is citizens' growing distrust of official charity organizations like the Chinese Red Cross Society, which was thrown into a serious credibility crisis in 2011 because of its lack of transparency.[12] On his Sina blog, Feng Yongfeng, director of the environmental NGO Nature University, argues that transparency is all important to NGOs. He believes that microblogging is a perfect tool for transparency and thus indispensable to NGO activism. In his own words, "If an NGO is transparent enough, its work must be microblogged and its microblog must be a way of doing its work."[13]

Online communities are a common feature of contemporary Internet culture worldwide. They exist in all types of network services, from Twitter to Facebook to Chinese Weibo. Not all online communities are civic, but those that do engage in civic activism may be called online civic communities. Examples of such include reading groups and film and music fan clubs on douban.com, and the websites of LGBT activists, hepatitis-B carriers, migrant workers, and other marginalized groups. Unlike NGOs, which are organized groups with a mission and a leadership

structure, these communities are loose networks of people with shared interests and identities. Activism within these communities is random and incidental, typically emerging from member interactions. Like NGO advocacy, community activism is moderate and non-confrontational. Though most of these communities remain strictly online, they do sometimes sprout out into the physical world as nonprofit organizations or business entities.

Take, for example, the online community aibai.com. In 1999, two gay men started the website gaychinese.net, which quickly attracted users. The site later switched to its current name of aibai.com, an acronym referring to an original open letter published online, "White Paper on Our Love." The website is today the most popular LGBT portal in the Chinese-language world, and in 2006, it established a nonprofit organization in Beijing called Aibai Culture and Education Center, which remains active.

Gandan Xiangzhao (GDXZ), an online community of hepatitis-B carriers, is another online activist community that spawned an affiliated NGO. Launched in 2001 as a BBS forum, GDXZ served as an alternative social space for a marginalized group. In 2003, forum members launched public campaigns and lawsuits concerning cases of job discrimination. The support of forum members was instrumental in a prominent case in Anhui, where a young man with hepatitis-B won a lawsuit against the local government. This eventually led to new government policies prohibiting discrimination against hepatitis-B carriers in job recruitment.[14] The community's websites have repeatedly been shut down, yet each time GDXZ has managed to reopen the site, which continues to thrive today. In 2006, a key member of the community started a nonprofit organization to sustain the community's anti-discrimination movement.

How does the Chinese party-state respond to the diverse forms of and participants in Internet activism? Censorship in China is not a static and monolithic system aimed at complete control of the Internet. On the contrary, the Chinese Internet censorship regime changes in response to the evolving forms of Internet activism. This process is characterized by the expansion of management institutions, the differentiation of targets of control, and the innovation of management methods.

The official institutions of the censorship regime consist of party propaganda departments and government agencies, as well as laws and regulations. The highest-level party agency charged to manage media is the Department of Propaganda. Various ministries under the State Council regulate contents and services through administrative regulations and licensing. Lower-level governments, meanwhile, may issue local regulations targeting their own constituencies. For example, in 2011, several departments in the Beijing municipal government jointly issued a regulation requiring microblog service providers in Beijing to verify personal identification when a user attempts to register an account.

The strategy of mobilizing NGOs and Internet content providers (ICPs) to curtail the online information flow is one example of adaptability in the regime's Internet control efforts. This strategy is also consistent with the regime's tradition of relying on "mass organizations" for policy implementation.[15] The main NGO in this area is the Internet Society of China (ISC). A national-level industrial association founded in May 2001 by leading network access carriers, Internet service providers (ISPs), and research institutions, ISC has thousands of subsidiary associations and societies at the provincial, municipal, and county levels. These organizations concentrate their work on promoting self-regulation.

The meaning of self-regulation differs by regulatory context.[16] In China, the emphasis has been on self-regulation by the industries, and on Internet firms' responsibility to monitor and remove harmful information from their websites. Chinese ICPs have long engaged in censorship; in the 1990s and early 2000s, when BBS were the most popular forms of online communities, most BBS forum managers were volunteers selected from regular Internet users. Today, major web portals hire large teams of full-time editors who use both filtering software and manual labor to monitor their websites. In 2010, when I interviewed the manager of a popular online community in Beijing, she told me that the firm had a team of thirty editors monitoring the contents on its website. Sina Weibo censors its postings routinely[17] – although, according to its own chief editor, "controlling content on Sina Weibo is a big headache,"[18] which explains the need to differentiate targets and innovate methods.

Government authorities view Internet protest as a threat to domestic social stability, national security, and the credibility of law enforcement authorities and government. Describing Internet mass incidents, one deputy chief of a provincial police department stressed their dramatically increasing numbers, complicated and multiple types, enormous mobilizing power, penetration by domestic and foreign hostile forces, and serious damage to stability.[19]

It is not surprising, then, that the areas and sites of regulation and control have expanded. Initially, the main targets of regulation were electronic BBS and Internet cafes, with regulations for the administration of each promulgated in 2000 and 2001, respectively. Today, content and service regulation is all-encompassing, covering Internet cafés, BBS, text messaging,

online news, video and audio sharing websites, online games, and blogs and microblogs.

At the same time, the authorities try to differentiate targets and issues. One study has found that censorship is likely to target Internet postings that call for collective action, but not postings that merely criticize the government.[20] The growing frequency of Internet incidents concerning corrupt officials, vulnerable individuals, and environmental protection indicates an increase in the number of incidents, as well as more government toleration of public discussion of these issues. To some extent, the Chinese leadership has acknowledged the legitimacy of online public opinion. Since July 2009, the Media Opinion Monitoring Office of *People's Daily Online* has published quarterly reports on local governments' capacity to respond to Internet mass incidents. The website of the Xinhua News Agency has an active section on public opinion with daily and weekly news releases of viral Internet postings on various types of social issues.[21]

Chinese authorities can be more or less tolerant of Internet protests depending on the particular issues brought into focus. In contrast, digital dissidents are key targets of censorship and repression. Such was the case in early 2011 when, following anonymous Internet calls for a Chinese "jasmine revolution," police detained or arrested notable bloggers and human rights lawyers in an effort to preempt mobilization.[22]

Compared with dissident communities, NGOs and online civic communities enjoy considerable leeway. While hoping to gain more public recognition, many online communities (such as in the LGBT community) remain largely alternative spaces of social support and solidarity. NGOs use social media to advocate public causes passionately, but rarely, if ever, do they

challenge the regime in the process. They seek social change by working with, rather than against, the government.[23]

Early government responses to Internet activism were reactive, panicked, and often heavy-handed; forced closure of well-known websites and detention of digital activists were not uncommon. Yitahutu, a popular BBS forum based in Peking University, was closed down in 2004, while another well-known website, Yannan Web, was closed in 2005. A 2004 Amnesty International report lists the names of fifty-four people who were detained or imprisoned for using the Internet in China.[24]

But in recent years, the emphasis has shifted to methods of "administration" and soft control. The 2010 white paper "The Internet in China" spells out the key elements of the new model, which is comprised of "laws and regulations, administrative supervision, self-regulation, technical protection, public supervision and social education."[25] These methods aim both to censor and to channel content. In 2010, a local public security department in Fujian province published a study about how it had innovated methods for social management. The report states:

> The management of virtual society combines damming with channeling, with more emphasis on channeling. ....The municipal public security bureau of Jian'ou set up an [I]nternet opinion and monitoring leadership group and office. ... Instead of simply blocking, filtering and deleting postings involving police, they find the people who post the messages and explain to them the harms and benefits, so they will voluntarily delete or modify their postings.[26]

The new model also aims to reduce the threat of Internet activism by enhancing the online influence of official media institutions, and by promoting corporate social responsibility among Internet firms and ethical conduct among Internet users. To achieve these goals, hidden methods are combined with public campaigns. Government-hired Internet commentators, with the pejorative nickname of *wumao* ("50-cent party"–named for the supposed state payout per successful post), are a hidden form of control. These commentators are employees or volunteers recruited by government agencies to participate anonymously in online discussion and publish views that either support state agendas or help defuse anti-party sentiment. Since its introduction in 2005, this practice has been adopted widely by local governments.[27]

In addition to covert means of shaping online public opinion, state and local governments employ many overt practices. Public campaigns, a distinct feature of Chinese politics in the Maoist era, continue to be used in modified forms.[28] The anti-vulgarity "special action" launched in January 2009 was a coordinated national campaign "to contain the wide spreading of vulgar contents online, further purify the cultural environment on the Internet, protect the healthy growth of the under-aged, and promote the healthy and orderly development of the Internet."[29] On the day of its launch, the China Internet Illegal Information Reporting Center (CIIRC)– established in 2004 under the sponsorship of the Internet Society of China– publicized the names of nineteen websites allegedly containing "vulgar contents." These websites included practically all the leading commercial sites: Google, Baidu, Sina, Sohu, Tencent, Netease, Mop, and Tianya. The CIIRC requested that these websites remove the offending contents, and in response, by February 24, 2009, a total of 2,962 websites had been closed.[30]

Opening government accounts on popular microblog platforms has been another overt method of activism management.

In September 2011, the Ministry of Public Security held a national conference to promote the use of microblogs by public security agencies. There were at that time more than four thousand official microblog accounts and five thousand individual police officer accounts.[31] One officer's microblog account, registered as "A Legendary Cyber-Policewoman" on Sina Weibo, had 2.1 million followers as of January 27, 2014. Employed by the Department of Public Security in Beijing, this cyber-policewoman posts regularly on all sorts of topics, from daily chitchat to advice on network security to reports of weather and traffic conditions. A photograph of her in police uniform smiling at the viewer conveys the image of a friendly police officer keeping watch, ready to offer help. Reminiscent of, yet somewhat different from, the soldier role model Lei Feng in the Maoist era, the legendary cyber-policewoman on Weibo represents the digital extension and creative reinvention of what Elizabeth Perry has called "a tradition of cultural governance." This tradition reaches deep into Chinese political culture, from imperial Confucian rituals to the Chinese Communist Party.[32]

Since Xi Jinping became China's Communist Party leader in November 2012, the tradition of cultural governance has enjoyed a resurgence. Called "more Maoist than reformer" by the *Los Angeles Times*,[33] Xi has reportedly encouraged adopting self-criticism as a means of curbing corruption.[34] Similarly, Maoist practices have been extended to the management of the Internet. For example, during the crackdown on "Internet rumors" in the summer of 2013, the popular blogger Xue Manzi was detained on charges of soliciting prostitution. He was then shown on national television networks confessing his wrongdoing of spreading irresponsible information on his Sina Weibo account. Such Cultural Revolution-style public shaming

sent a clear warning to Chinese Internet users about the limits of online speech.

Internet activism is not unique to China, nor are government efforts to monitor and contain it. Wherever the Internet has developed, citizens embrace it for protest and resistance while state powers attempt to control it. Yet in different countries and regions of the world, the specific forms of Internet activism and control vary. In the United States, purely or primarily online protests have taken place before and remain a component of contemporary social movements. Examples include varieties of electronic civic disobedience first articulated by the Critical Art Ensemble, the various Indymedia projects that were born with the Seattle WTO protests in 1999, and online signature petitions and campaign websites such as the influential MoveOn.org.

A distinct feature of online activism in the United States, however, is institutionalization. Since the radical protests of the 1960s, social movements in Western industrial nations have become institutionalized, characterized by the bureaucratization of social movement organizations and the routinization, rather than the radicalization, of claims-making activities.[35] Money, membership, and other resources have become crucial to the survival of bureaucratized organizations. The Internet developed in the United States alongside a firmly established civil society, and use of new media technologies by online activist organizations is therefore embedded in a rich tradition of the operations of large membership-based nonprofit organizations. And so we see that like other social movement organizations or interest groups in the United States, even an online organization like MoveOn.org is membership-based.

Thus, more often than not, the Internet is treated merely as a new tool for carrying

Guobin Yang

out routine activities (such as fundraising) for preexisting civic associations. Spontaneous and unorganized forms of online action of the kind known as Internet mass incidents in China are not only uncommon, but may be viewed with suspicion. For example, the unorganized but collective efforts in 4Chan and Reddit online communities to search for the Boston bombing suspects after April 15, 2013 – a kind of online collective action not unlike the online exposure of corrupt government officials in China – was met with public criticism and cries of vigilantism.

Russia, on the other hand, does have its share of Internet mass incidents,[36] ranging from Internal Affairs Directorate Major Aleksei Dymovsky's 2009 YouTube whistleblowing on corrupt Russian law enforcement officials and practices[37] to the 2012 music videos of the political protest group Pussy Riot. The pattern of information dissemination in the Dymovsky case is remarkably similar to events in China, starting with the posting of a video, followed by a large number of online viewers responding, before finally receiving coverage from the mass media.

But otherwise, Internet activism in Russia is more organized than in China, and thus more closely resembles the U.S. model. To protest against the allegedly "unfair" parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011 and 2012, activists and leaders of oppositional parties organized an alternative online election to create a representative body to push for fundamental changes to the political system.[38] In a SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act)-style protest on August 1, 2013, one thousand seven hundred websites in Russia went dark to protest a new anti-piracy law that enabled the Russian government to blacklist Internet resources without issuing a court order.[39] China had its own SOPA moment in 2009, when the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology was

on the verge of requiring all personal computers sold in mainland China to have installed a filtering software called Green Dam-Youth Escort. Yet the protest was not the coordinated blackening of websites, but took the form of spontaneous verbal protests in online communities in the typical style of an Internet mass incident.

As my discussion of Chinese NGO advocacy shows, civic organizing is on the rise in China; but there are clear political limits, and NGOs tend to avoid radical, confrontational methods. The more organized nature of Internet activism in Russia is due partly to a more open political environment. In Russia, as in the United States, there are "opposition parties" that can regularly organize activism and protest, whereas the formation of independent political parties in China is out of the question.

Another difference between Internet activism in China and that in Russia and the United States centers on Internet platforms. Videos and animations are used for protest in China, but they are posted on local Chinese platforms rather than on YouTube, which like Twitter and Facebook, is blocked within China. The most popular platforms for protest in China have always been large online communities run by commercial websites. Integrating news, blogs, microblogs, BBS forums, as well as video sites, gaming, music, and literature, these communities are highly interactive spaces. In this respect, Chinese online platforms resemble the Russian blogosphere more than the American. Interactive functions, such as the "friends list" on LiveJournal, are just as common on Chinese blog sites. And China's microblogging websites allow users to post videos, images, and long messages when they retweet or comment on other users' postings – functions not currently available on Twitter.

Internet censorship as practiced in China, including filtering keywords, block-

ing websites, and requiring online forums to monitor and censor postings, is not known in the United States or Russia. But this does not suggest the total absence of surveillance or policing of protest activities in these countries. Sociologists have long studied the policing of protest in Western democracies. In the United States, activists' reports and scholarly research have revealed aggressive and sophisticated surveillance of, for example, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) activists by the NYPD, and there were also instances of Twitter censoring the OWS hashtag.[40] While websites in Russia are generally not filtered or censored, Russian authorities do use law to restrict illegal content, and they resort to extralegal or covert practices to limit information flow.[41]

Beyond these crucial differences among the three nations, there are some intriguing converging trends in state surveillance. Sociologist Patrick Gillham has found that compared with protest policing in earlier periods, the policing during OWS emphasized the control of public spaces, high-tech surveillance, the management of information and intelligence about activists, and the proactive shaping of the production of public information. These new features signal the emergence of a new mode of protest policing that centers on the use of surveillance and intelligence to manage risks and incapacitate potential offenders. Signs of this approach also appeared in the Chinese police crackdown on the abortive jasmine revolution in February 2011, when the censorship and surveillance of the Internet tightened, and surveillance vehicles and police officers, armed with digital cameras and communication technologies, showed up at the planned venues in Beijing and Shanghai to forestall street protests. Analysts have also found the revival of the use of Mao-style grassroots informants for collecting information about dissidents and potential protest activities.[42]

Like its Chinese counterpart, the Russian regime uses proactive methods to control information and boost its own political messages. Russia reportedly started using paid pro-government bloggers to guide online information in 2005.[43] This practice is reminiscent of the use of anonymous Internet commentators (the 50-cent party) to guide online public opinion in China, a practice that also began in 2005.

To a considerable extent, with respect to Internet activism and control, the differences among China, the United States, and Russia can be explained by their different political economies. Russia is often considered a hybrid regime with a nominally democratic system.[44] It is therefore not surprising that Russia falls somewhere between China and the United States, with significantly more political spaces for activism than China. Although China is an authoritarian state, its economy is capitalistic, a peculiar combination often designated as state capitalism. For Internet activism and control, this means that although the government seeks to suppress undesirable content, it cannot afford to destroy its Internet economy by forbidding people to talk online. For their part, Internet firms, caught between government censorship regulations and business aspirations, promote their businesses by creating mechanisms for encouraging user interaction while gingerly walking the censorship line. Some of the peculiar, interactive features of Chinese blog and microblog websites result from these negotiations.

Yet political economy cannot fully explain the specific features of Internet politics. Equally important are the nations' political cultures and histories, and the everyday practices of regular Internet users. Thus, the institutionalization of Internet activism in the United States reflects the organized nature of American

Guobin Yang

social movements in general. And however much Russia and China may differ in their approaches to containing Internet dissent and activism, they share one crucial similarity: a political tradition of media control and a government "bent on centralization and rife with controlling impulses."[45] The method of using the Internet to promote government messages in Russia and China derives from a shared history of state propaganda.

The ways in which a new technology is used or contested depend on preexisting conventions and current practices. The formation of a Chinese-style Internet activism, including Internet mass incidents and the penchant for using coded language, is shaped by both China's political context and users' practices and habits in their daily production, circulation, and consumption of online content. These practices combine elements of existing forms with creative adaptations of old forms or new inventions. Thus, when websites began to offer electronic BBS, they naturally became a forum for users to air grievances and to protest. For many Internet users, these postings were like electronic versions of big-character wall posters, a time-tested form of public expression in modern Chinese history.

The Chinese party-state continually modifies its policies and methods of containing Internet activism. No longer trying to eradicate online protest, it has shifted to managing and co-opting it, in the hopes of channeling it to its own advantage. As scholars of Chinese politics have shown, this regime adaptability is not new, but is part of a long history of political flexibility.[46] Of course, China's history of popular protest is equally rich. And now this entangled history of mutual adaptation, of continuity and change, is unfolding in the digital realm.

ENDNOTES

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[1] Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, 2nd ed. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 8.

[2] On social management as a new model of governance in China, see Frank N. Pieke, "The Communist Party and Social Management in China," *China Information* 26 (2) (2012): 149–165.

[3] A recent study by scholars in China surveyed 248 Internet incidents in 2009 and 274 incidents in 2010. One-third of those in 2009 and half of those in 2010 concern social issues and law enforcement authorities. See Yu Guoming, ed., *Annual Report on Public Opinion in China* (in Chinese) (Beijing: People's Daily Press, 2011), 17.

[4] James Pomfret, "Southern Weekly Strike: Scuffles Flare at Protest over Censorship of Chinese Newspaper," *The Huffington Post*, January 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/08/southern-weekly-strike-scuffles-protest_n_2429943.html (accessed April 26, 2013).

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