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Abstract:
Social media are often perceived as a frivolous space for youths to connect socially. But youths who live in countries where free expression is curtailed and official news outlets are subject to government censorship, information and communication technology (ICT) offers an increasingly important vehicle for political expression. In many cases, blogging and social media tools fulfill the role that journalism serves in more democratic societies. This article considers recent events in Iran, Egypt, China, and Myanmar, among other countries, and how Western information/social network corporations facilitate dissent. It also considers the ethical implications for doing so when there are negotiations with authoritative regimes, and the risks to the youthful communities that are at the receiving end of the consequences of these policies.

Keywords: social media – political organization – ethics – networks – freedom

Introduction

In the minds of many people, social media are perceived as a frivolous space for youths to connect socially, play games or share photos. But for youths in countries where freedom of expression is curtailed and official news outlets are subject to government censorship, information and communication technology (ICT) offers an increasingly important vehicle for political expression, fulfilling the role that journalism serves in more democratic societies.

Whereas citizens in authoritarian countries often had no means to alarm others outside their communities and societies about human rights violations, the technological advancements of the World Wide Web and mobile telephone systems have had a sweeping impact on long-distance communication of dissent: "transgressions of international norms by non-democratic states were exposed intermittently via smuggled film or video, or the testament of escaped dissidents, now such material is routinely posted online; visible to a growing audience of Net users" (Stanyer and Davidson, 2009, p. 2).

Human rights activists have quickly adapted newer Internet technologies, including social network websites Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter, among many others, to spread in-

formation that repressive governments would like to keep out of the public domain (Hamdy, 2009). For instance, as Biswas and Porter (2008) note, "In countries such as Bangladesh where democracies have fallen in crisis and the traditional press faces censorship, blogs and other Internet-based publications are flourishing, as journalists and writers turn to the Internet to report breaking news" (p. 25).

However, most totalitarian regimes do not want to take any risks that could jeopardize their power status and undertake exhaustive efforts to oppose critical messages on the Web. The techniques deployed by government officials to maintain supremacy over Internet expression range from subtle and cunning to overt and blunt. Some countries block access outright (e.g., North Korea, Myanmar, and Turkmenistan) while others engage in massive filtering that results in self-censorship (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan), or couple infrastructure development with more sophisticated filtering of political and social content (e.g., China, Egypt, Tunisia, and Vietnam) (Hachigian and Wu, 2003; Deibert et al., 2010; Morillon and Julliard, 2010).

The blogosphere, which allows dissidents to put critical information online, often is facilitated by software produced by developers from countries without much state censorship. Yet, other companies from those same countries – or also sometimes the *same* companies (e.g., Yahoo!) – are deliberately helping those repressive leaders by providing technology that enables censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Consequently, every now and then information messages are blocked in such way that the content cannot be accessed or transmitted (Garvie, 2007).

Although leaders of companies such as Google have acknowledged certain downsides of censorship (McLaughlin, 2007), in practice they sometimes have enabled governments to remove critical remarks or even prosecute those who disseminate those claims (Zuckerman, 2010). Companies help governments create an illusion of transparency and honesty in the business and media sectors (Sakr, 2007), whereas in practice, users either self-censor or discover unwritten boundaries only after they have already crossed them (Sakr, 2010).

It is worth investigating the ethical implications for social media companies when users – particularly youths – put themselves in potential harm by taking on hostile government forces online. Large technology conglomerates, such as Google, Microsoft, Skype, and Yahoo! have been criticized for their collaboration in censorship by the Chinese government and in other authoritarian nations (Human Rights Watch, 2006; Zuckerman, 2010)

In this article, we consider recent events in Iran, Egypt, China, and Myanmar, among other countries, and how Western information/social network corporations facilitate dissent. We will also consider the ethical implications for doing so when there are negotiations with authoritative regimes, and the risks to the online users and communities who receive the consequences of these policies.

The Basic Right of Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is considered a basic human right, and enumerated as such in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims "this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

That basic right is rooted in an awareness instinct that causes people to seek information of events that transpire beyond their direct experience (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). They also note that news keeps citizens informed in a rapidly changing world, but only when the press acts as a watchdog against those in power – otherwise, it becomes merely a tool to help those in control to stay in power.

Becker, Vlad and Nusser (2007) explained that press freedom, as defined by Weaver (1977), is possible when the dissemination of diverse ideas and opinions is tolerated in all layers of society and without governmental and non-governmental constraints on the distribution of those messages. Furthermore, they note McQuail's (2000) assertion that media freedom encompasses both the liberty of media to produce content as well as ability of citizens to access that content. Yet it could be expected that some differences between societies will emerge. The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) called it "a function within a society [that] must vary with the social context" (p. 12). A combination of different cultural and historical circumstances leads to those different shared meanings of a free press within communities (Gunaratne, 2002).

Regardless of the definition used in term of free political expression, the proliferation of public access to the means of media production (i.e. Internet access and acquisition of other technological assets) has resulted in a growing media democracy. Bennett (2003) explains that an important subtext of that movement is the crumbling of the distinction between media producers and consumers as a result of open publishing and editing software, with the results shared through personal digital networks.

This increased access to disseminate means has opened new frontiers in questions related to freedom of press and expression. Importantly, in almost all nations, people are no longer solely dependent on the information provided by news media outlets that are controlled by those in power (Garvie, 2007; Jardin, 2007; Stanyer and Davidson, 2009; Ethio-Zagol, 2007), although a digital divide within those societies may still disenfranchise large populations because of a lack of computer and network connections, usage opportunities, and digital skills (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2000).

The Internet revolution

The digital revolution may at some point serve as a successful deterrent of otherwise concealed government repression. As Stanyer and Davidson (2009) pointed out, it is clear that "oppressive acts of non-democratic states have never been so visible" (p. 2). With mobile phones and access to the Web it is feasible to thwart blackouts and censorship by releasing pictures and video clips to a worldwide audience instantly (Lai, 2004; Gordon,

2007). Consequently, when new networks are pushing society to escape previous patterns of control, in some societies those who hold the reins of control frequently push back. Increasing access to the tools of ICT has allowed adults and youths in countries under repressive regimes sidestep the tyrannical controls on expression and organize politically in ways that would have been impossible previously (Ethio-Zagol, 2007).

Bureaucracies serving brutal dictators and filled with corrupt officials develop efficient and effective practices that mask a system of oppressive control by a small group of elites. Such apparatus is efficient in its way that outsiders rarely get a complete picture of the repression or fraud and bribery that takes places endlessly (Luyendijk, 2007), although in countries such as Singapore "people are constantly aware of the political limits on behavior imposed by the state" (Tremewan, p. 2). Throughout the years, dissidents have disappeared without a trace – a practice that has not suddenly stopped. In a digital world it becomes much harder to keep corrupt practices invisible from civil rights activists. Nowadays some of those victims are able to post messages to the microblogging service Twitter about their upcoming arrest when the police or military are on the doorsteps. This indicates a drastic change in the government-citizen power struggle in countries with oppressive regimes, although the former is still much more dominant than the often defenseless individuals (Menon, 2000).

The Internet, as a means of communication, has been cited as the primary tool for activists to collaborate over large distances – both inside and outside their own countries – to uphold strong resistance to political leaders (Farrands, 2004). In certain cases this has led to the downfall of autocrats, who were considered untouchable – even as short as a few years before they lost power (Dashti, 2009).

When the traditional – handcuffed – news media organizations in Jakarta were not able to provide all the information citizens longed for at the end of President Suharto's reign in the late 1990s, the news and other information of opposition groups was easily obtainable through hundreds of e-mail lists (Manzella, 2000; Hachigian and Wu, 2003). "The Internet allowed Indonesians to discuss taboo subjects, such as corruption in the military and the business empires of Suharto's children, and to link up with other dissidents" (Eng, 1998, p. 20).

Castels (1997) has argued that information technology is fostering the creation of a network society, which he defines as "a society that is structured in its dominant functions and processes around networks" (p. 408). Also others have noted that the increasing access to information technology is helping form new networks, which play a transformative role in human communication – and in power relationships (Hachigian and Wu, 2003). "The dynamics of networks push society towards an endless escape form its own constraints and controls, towards an endless supersession and reconstruction of its values and institutions, towards a meta-social, constant rearrangement of human institutions and organizations" (Castels, 1997, p. 409).

While some take issue with Castels' network society concept (Webster, 2006), there are examples of technology pushing societies into more openness come from over the world. Groundbreaking news reports ignored by the mainstream press outlets in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have made their way to the public through the Internet, "to circumvent censorship and cowardice" (Idsvoog, 2008) and even scooping the international media (Kulikova and Perlmutter, 2007). Similar results are obtained by bloggers and online

journalists in Burma and Zimbabwe (Stanyer and Davidson, 2009), Ukraine and Russia (Krasnoboka, 2002), Egypt (Abdullah, 2005), and many others countries with oppressive elites (e.g., Endeshaw, 2004; Dashti, 2009).

Techniques of Repression

Repressive regimes are fully aware of the power of websites such as YouTube and Twitter (Stanyer and Davidson, 2009). Rulers can only continue their dominance when they distort social reality (Payne, 2008) and rely on limitations on the freedom of expression "as an instrument to assist in the attainment, preservation or continuance of […] power" (Scammell, 1988, p. 10). Unsurprisingly they try to squash online dissent, leading to prosecution of offenders similar to those that spread messages in print or orally (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Often disguised as measures against terrorism, child pornography, and cyber security, repressive regimes exert control over Internet communications by clamping down on both the production of messages and user access to messages. There is a variety of actions that can be taken to thwart dissent, including, but not limited to, (1) blocking servers, domains, keywords, and IP addresses; (2) compelling Internet sites to register with authorities or establishing a licensing system; (3) setting strict criteria for what is considered acceptable; (4) expanding defamation and slander laws to deter postage of critical material; and (5) surveillance of individual internet accounts (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010).

China, for example, employs thousands of cybercops, a unit of highly-skilled computer experts, patrolling the Internet to detect messages that are considered inappropriate by the Communist Party. The end result is a wide array of forbidden websites and messages, created by government opponents that are taken down (Endeshaw, 2004).

China does not shy away from blocking websites created abroad, ostensibly to curb social vices such as pornography and gambling, yet researchers found that it is easier to access those kinds of content than it is to access information about political or religious group, human rights, or alternative news coverage (Karlekar and Cook, 2009). For instance, a short while before the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square events, a dozen websites – including Twitter, YouTube, Bing, Flickr, and WordPress – could not be reached by Internet users located within the Chinese borders (Morillon and Julliard, 2010). More recently, the Chinese government blocked access to domestic and foreign websites on the day it was announced that Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The previous year, Xiaobo had been sentenced to an 11-years prison term for inciting subversion of state power (Jiang, 2010).

Even when certain websites can be reached, some search terms are blocked (e.g. democracy, human rights, and references to the protests at Tiananmen Square) and users cannot receive information using those forbidden words or phrases. "The information blackout has been so well-enforced for the last 20 years that the vast majority of young Chinese citizens are not even aware that the events of June 1989 ever happened" (ibid, p. 9).

In addition to filtering and policing, China also resorts to jailing Internet dissidents. The authorities would prefer that those cybercops do not find illegal websites in the first place. Therefore, the arrests of a small number of tech-savvy dissidents indicate a mecha-

nism of control comes in the form of well-published prosecution to coerce others in obedience (Weber and Jia, 2007). For instance, Reporters Without Borders notes that thirty journalists and seventy-two Internet users are in prison for expressing their views. They are charged for subversion and dissemination of state secrets (Morillon and Julliard, pp. 10-11).

The same scare-tactics are being used in other countries, such as Iran, where the friction between online free expression and government repression is playing out with close interest of Western governments and citizens. Dayem (2009) contends that the blogosphere is the frontier where the limits of free expression are tested, writing that the government "is involved in a constantly evolving engagement with bloggers to define the boundaries of what can be said in Iran" (p. 44).

Reporters Without Borders calls Iran "one of cyber-censorship's record-holding countries," noting that new media are demonized as "serving foreign interests" (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 18). Internet users must contend with content filtering, intimidation, detention, and even torture (Freedom House, 2009). Yet, against that backdrop, there is a vibrant blogging scene in Iran. Kelly and Etling (2008), researchers for the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, estimated that in early 2008 there were about 60,000 routinely updated blogs.

Another common tool to control access is for governments to influence Internet connection speeds, effectively shutting off the spigot of information. In Iran, for example, the government controls connection speeds at critical moments, such as during the 31st-anniversary celebrations of the Islamic Revolution in 2010. Similar techniques are used in Myanmar, Egypt, Cuba, Syria, and Eritrea (Morillon and Julliard, 2010).

Twitter was used to organize protests in Iran in the wake of the contested June 2009 presidential election. Harsh restrictions were imposed on foreign journalists following the election, so in many ways social media was the only way to get news out of the country. BBC editor Stephan Herrmann noted "there's a huge ongoing, informed and informative discussion in Iran between people who care deeply about what is happening there and who are themselves monitoring everything they can, then circulating the most useful information and links" (Herrmann, 2009). Both YouTube and Twitter played a major role in disseminating the video of the fatal shooting of protester Neda Agha-Soltan – a story that took on international importance (Fathi, 2009).

Twitter (2009) seemed to acknowledge its responsibility during the height of the Iran situation. The company re-scheduled a routine maintenance shutdown to "recognize the role Twitter is […] playing as an important communication tool in Iran." As a result, though, the regime tightened its grip on social networks: Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube were all shortly blocked and inaccessible in Iran, and there have been reports of cell phone seizures and possible arrests of people taking photos or filming events with their phones (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 19).

Likewise, Egypt is a nation where computer users have turned to social media services to circumvent government controls on expression. Reporters Without Borders called the Internet in Egypt "a mobilization and dissension platform," adding that: "Although website blocking remains limited, authorities are striving to regain control over bloggers who are more and more organized, despite all the harassment and arrests" (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 15). Egyptian protesters were able to use Facebook to launch forbidden protests critical of the ruling regime on April 6, 2008.

According to The New York Times, Facebook is the third most-visited Web site in Egypt. Reporter Samantha Shapiro (2009) noted that Facebook "allows users to speak freely to one another and encourages them to form groups," which makes it "irresistible as a platform not only for social interaction but also for dissent." Yet, those protests were not without danger; the organizers were arrested, so were other Egyptian bloggers. "Although later released, their detention is yet another example of the authorities' usual heavy-handed response to unknown manifestations of evolving new media platforms" (Hamdy, 2009, p. 99).

Rulers in some countries have even harsher stances than Egypt or Iran, such as in Myanmar, which has one of the most secretive and brutal authoritarian regimes in the world. According to Reporters Without Borders, the nation has one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the world, and users go online at their own peril. "The Military Junta considers netizens to be enemies of the State. The legislation governing Internet use – the Electronic Act – is one of the most liberticidal laws in the world" (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 5).

Only a select group of government officials and business representatives is allowed access to the Web; for others it is considered a dissident act. The only way country leaders can exert control is by shutting down access to the Internet nationwide. But in 2007, even Myanmar's military government was unable to stop information about the violent crackdown Buddhist monk protests from leaking out at the hands of bloggers (Deibert et al., 2010).

Economic incentives and openness of expression

Authoritarians have always struggled to control technological advancements. For example, dishes for receiving satellite television signals provided citizens in Singapore an opportunity to bypass national media systems that conveyed the controlled-messages of the elites through direct access to foreign news programs. The national government, therefore, ordered a ban on the dishes when the new technology was introduced. Soon after the rulers of Singapore discovered the drawback of that decision; because financial institutions in the country were not able to watch CNN's coverage of failing negotiations between Iraq and the United States in the early 1990s, they were behind their international trade partners and competitors to react on rapid changes on the world markets. This short lag resulted in large financial losses and convinced the government to make changes in its policy to prohibit the use of satellite dishes (George, 2003).

A few years later, with another technological development that seemed to catch on – the Internet – the authorities in Singapore were quick to react as well, requiring that users accessed the Internet through proxy servers that filtered certain Web sites (Deibert et al., 2010). In 1996, it was the first nation that imposed regulation for content on the web and has continued adopting legislation to protect the dominant position of the ruling People's Action Party (Lai, 2004; Lee, 2004). However, the government understood as well that a complete ban for all its citizens would eventually lead to a disastrous downfall of the economy (George, 2009).

Furthermore, the country and surrounding nations, such as Malaysia, were trying to position themselves in the global economy as frontrunners of information technology de-

velopment (Huff, 2005; Lim, 2005). They needed to reach large Internet penetration to maintain their transition towards a more stable service and information industry, even though there was the understanding that it would be much harder to control political expression in the marketplace of ideas (Baber, 2005). Rulers are "less capable of imposing prior restraints or encouraging self-censorship – their more routine forms of [print and broadcast] media control" (George, 2003, p. 247).

In other parts of the world, such as the Gulf region (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), governments also made decisions on Internet access and regulation based on economic prosperity and advancements in education and health sectors. Although those countries have different degrees of (online and offline) repression for political expression and speech, they negotiate such freedoms and limitations with potential financial gains that come with (quasi-)open access as well. For instance, similar to Singapore, there is more freedom in Kuwait to report news online compared to traditional print and broadcast outlets, even when it includes criticism on the ruling elite: "What was considered a taboo 'red line' in the local press became acceptable 'green line' online" (Dashti, 2009, p. 91).

For many governments this results in manageable risks, because free speech can still be contained if necessary. More important, online access allows financial and other information sectors to thrive. This potentially results in the economic prosperity and stronger relation with foreign investors, which prolongs the power relation between the small ruling elite and the majority that they try to oppress. In such scenario, the online environment may cause distractions at time, but will earn them more if they can contain undermining attempts on the Web (Farrands, 2004; Lee, 2004).

The Great Firewall

If there has been one country that has successfully managed a massive and complex Web environment, it is China. As the most populated country, China also wants to acquire a dominant position in the lucrative technology industry and is experiencing similar struggles to negotiate the openness of its own Internet network. According to Winfield and Peng (2005), the Chinese media system is moving from totalitarianism to market authoritarianism. For instance, the country wants to put more emphasis on the commercial aspects of the state media rather than using them as pure propaganda tools (Weber and Jia, 2007). To make such transition possible, the government has recognized the value of being connected with other countries through high-speed technology networks. This has resulted in investments of billions of dollars in a vast expansion of its broadband capabilities to serve an information technology infrastructure that sustains the rapid growing e-commerce sector (Bi, 2001).

Yet, the party rulers did not want to give up the massive control of information while making vast capital investments. China's Internet population – about 300 million – is the largest in the world, but is subjected to an advanced censorship system aimed at facilitating economic growth while controlling content. "In the hands of a regime obsessed with maintaining stability – censorship has developed into a tool for political control" (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 8).

As Endeshaw (2004) maintained, the initial expectation was that it would be easy and non-invasive to keep dissonant voices off the Chinese web, but "[g]radually, the usual Chinese pragmatism prevailed and institutional and legal means of taming the Internet started to take over" to keep, what they consider, inflammatory message of the Web. (p. 41). Li (2010) notes that the seven Internet Access Providers in China are under state control, making "the internet in China as a national project monopolized by the party-state" (p. 66). This allows the government to maintain a much stricter policy to keep dissent messages offline compared to the countries discussed above, while trying to keep the economic disadvantages to a minimum (Chan, Lee and Pan, 2006).

Ironically, the Chinese government also needs the cooperation of large foreign media and technology firms for large-scale capital investments. Many of those companies operate from nations whose governments oppose such large-scale censorship of the Web. Because of the need for foreign funds, China seems to be in a dependency role and partly out of control over its own infrastructural fate. But as a country with the largest amount of human capital the roles are essentially reversed: it has much leverage to maintain this position when negotiating with Western technology and media firms. The Chinese government can restrict access to those companies that do not make concessions regarding the censorship models as spelled out by the Party (Endeshaw, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Foreign companies consider China a goldmine; it offers huge markets and cheap labor. Besides the need for investment, there was another important reason to collaborate with foreign technology companies. When search engines and other websites are located outside of China, the government cannot do much about the content. They could block the website, but not necessarily track down the authors of critical messages. Therefore, it needed jurisdiction over the websites. So by "dangling the carrot of an Internet user market set to shortly outstrip America's" it could entice companies such Google to launch google.cn on Chinese servers so the government would have a say in what words and phrases were off-limit (Garvie, 2007, p. 45).

For four years, Google has offered a government-filtered version of its search engine after it negotiated access restrictions with the Chinese government. Those restrictions result in selective exposure to government-approved material that could lead to erroneous ideas on reality by youths. An example of that is in China, where government filtered Web content has given the illusion of free expression, but where dissidents are still subject to crackdowns. In early 2010, Google and China began a face-off on that topic that is, as yet, unresolved, but Google is pledging to stop filtering its search engine results (Drummond, 2010). In response, China's state-owned mobile telephone provider and state-run news service announced that they would join forces to create a search engine to fill the void (Barboza, 2010).

Navigating Pressure of Authoritarian Governments

Google's confrontation with the Chinese government leads businesses to navigate government pressure to comply with domestic laws the privacy rights of their users. When

companies stand up to governments over free expression issues, they open themselves up for retaliation. For instance, in 2010, both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia threatened blockages of BlackBerry data services – a decision Freedom House blamed on BlackBerry's data encryption and data routing processes that sidestep government monitoring. Robert Guerra, Freedom House's internet freedom project director said in a statement that such moves "highlight a developing trend of forcing companies to choose between being complicit in government repression in exchange for access to lucrative markets or upholding universally guaranteed human rights" (McGuire, 2010).

During a hearing in U.S. Congress on Internet censorship in China, Michael Callahan (2006), Senior Vice President of Yahoo!, said the American companies ultimately face one choice: comply with the rules of the foreign governments, or leave those markets. So far, many companies have opted for the former. During the same hearing, representatives of both Microsoft and Google argued that withdrawal from the markets in oppressive countries would be counterproductive. Even with some government censorship, they argue, the companies provide additional options for citizens to search for and access information sources that otherwise would be out of reach. However, some fear that such stance would give authoritarian countries too much leverage to demand additional changes in the future, sparking a "race to the bottom" (Maclay, 2010, p. 89).

There are attempts by the companies to strike a balance between business interests and the protection of free expression. In the wake of Yahoo!'s decision to provide Chinese authorities information on dissidents that led to the jailing of journalist Shi Tao and the arrests of others, the company became a founding member of the Global Network Initiative, together with Microsoft, Google, and a number of non-profit organizations (e.g. World Press Freedom Committee) and universities (e.g. Berkeley and Harvard). The organization aims for developing a "corporate commitment to meaningfully integrate the protection of freedom of expression and privacy into both business practice and corporate culture" (Maclay, 2010, pp. 87-88).

Implications for New Generation of Netizens

It could be argued that both the benefits and risks of turning to online media to register political dissent have a disproportionate effect on youths simply as a function of demographics. Of the countries discussed here, many have populations that are relatively young. The median age in China is 35.2, in Egypt is 24, in Iran is 27.6, and in Myanmar is 26.5. This is compared to a median age of 44.3 in Germany, 44.6 in Japan and 36.8 in the United States (CIA World Factbook). Therefore, whatever harsh consequences are meted out to online political dissidents seem more likely to fall on young computer users.

On the positive side, ICT offers users tools for identity formation that might not be available in unmediated space. For example, Dayem (2009) attributes the popularity of blogging in Iran to a highly literate and very young population. Further, Kia (2008) notes that young Iranians "gravitate towards the Internet to avoid cultural and political obstacles in their lives and expectations to follow social norms" in ways that influence lifestyle choices. (p. 29).

There are distinct dangers when governments are effective in controlling the flow of information online. Even though China has a relatively high median age compared to the

other nations considered here, government statistics from a survey conducted by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that Chinese Internet users are very young, with 33 percent of users aged 10-19, while 29.8 percent is 20-29 (CNNIC 2009).

Considering Prensky's concept of digital natives (2001), it seems that young users who have grown up around technology are better equipped to find ways around government controls. Young tech-savvy protestors throughout the world (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia) avoid censorship by creating proxy websites to access illegal information (Iran Proxy, 2007; Samin, 2008). Additionally, youth protestors try circumvent detectors of the censor software by replacing "forbidden" words with others symbols and characters (Shuguang, 2008).

More work needs to be done to determine the effects of government control over Internet information on young audiences. Hull, Zacher and Hibbert (2009) cite Maira and Soep's assertion of the centrality of youth in global economic, cultural, and social processes. However, they note that studies of youth culture and globalization have not often intersected, perhaps because the work on transnationalism and globalism focus on adults while youths are "assumed to be incomplete social actors, or subjects less able to exert agency in the face of globalization," (p. xxii).

The Future Outlook for Activists

The tools of ICT offer tremendous opportunities for citizens to circumvent government controls. Yet repressive governments do not cede control so easily, and frequently establish technological controls to prevent objectionable messages from being disseminated and legal controls to persecute those who engage in such organizing. Those governmental attempts to re-establish control are facilitated in many cases by Western companies, for whom such tactics would seem to be antithetical. In reality, Sakr (2007) notes, those tactics help companies create an illusion of transparency even while many topics remain verboten. "Either people censor themselves to avoid overstepping the unwritten boundaries, or they discover they have 'transgressed' after it is too late" (p. 37).

That conflict places Western companies in an ethical dilemma – between upholding the basic human right to free expression and the desire to tap into the lucrative markets that exist under authoritarian regimes. The Global Network Initiative is one positive step, but it will only be effective if companies are willing to forgo revenues – to leave money on the table – in the service of a higher ideal. The feasibility of such an ethical standard is questionable in a corporate world in which shareholders determine the ultimate course of business.

This article has considered countries that are known to have bad human rights records. Yet even countries with a great degree of freedom may curtail access in certain situations, claiming to be protecting public safety or national security. Future researchers should look at the line between suppression of dissent and legitimate government controls in the online world.

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