The World: Out of Control

The Internet Changes Dictatorship's Rules

Barbara Crossette

Aug. 1, 1999

It used to be easier to spot the tell-tale signs of a revolution in the making. There were the Molotov cocktails, the placard-bearing protesters, the fiery speeches, the subversive tapes made by shadowy underground leaders with ski hoods and thrilling stage names. If and when they succeeded, revolutionaries often tightened their grip on power through the mass media: the heroic movies, stirring music raining down from communal loudspeakers, television news cut and tailored to suit the regime.

But now China, home of the very visible Long March and the agit-prop film, followed by the big-character poster and the Goddess of Democracy, has been caught off guard by a vast, silent, virtually invisible movement (if not exactly a revolution) that came together not on the streets but on the Internet. Its distinguishing activity is collective deep-breathing. Its ideology, if it can be called that, includes the notion that Buddhist-style concentration can cultivate "supernormal" powers. Its leader, Li Hongzhi, is a former office clerk who now lives in New York. Its tens of millions of members appear to dress like the white-collar middle class people they are.

The panicked reaction by the Chinese Government — which in recent weeks banned the movement known as Falun Gong and sent 1,200 state employees who were members to that Asian Communist mind-cleanser, re-education, is perhaps even more startling than the movement itself. It demonstrates in a flash of instant history that totalitarians, already flummoxed by the fax machine and the cellular phone, may be facing the biggest high-tech challenge of all in the Internet.

"This is not the first time that the Internet's been used in China in a way that's been threatening to the Government," Elizabeth Economy, senior fellow for China at the Council on Foreign Relations, points out. She said that the China Democracy Party, whose leaders were arrested last year, was found to have used the Internet to organize across the country. "The thing that was so threatening was certainly not the number of people, but rather that this was inter-provincial, that in over two-thirds of Chinese provinces, the China Democracy Party was able to establish branches. And this was explicitly political in the way that Falun Gong is not. The China Democracy Party still exists. It's still there, and it can emerge at any time because of the Internet."

The Internet's power to change behavior, from consumer buying habits to self-education, self-diagnosis and new directions in leisure activity, is well understood in the West. Its networking power has been used extremely effectively by low-budget civic and political organizations in fields as diverse as environmental protection and international criminal law.

But it has often been assumed in industrial countries that access to computers and the Internet was limited to such small elite groups in the developing nations that there would be little public impact in the near future. Experts have focused on just the opposite trend: that developmental gaps between the people of rich and poor nations, whatever their political systems, would only widen catastrophically in the short term.

Then along came the China Democracy Party and, now, the much bigger Falun Gong with tens of millions of members; they prove that all it takes is an elite that can

motivate the masses to give the one-party state a scare. It is worse still for totalitarians when those citizens with access to computers draw on old traditions and religions to broaden the appeal of troublesome sects or cults.

In societies accustomed to sharing a still-rare technological tool, one computer (like one village television receiver or a communal phone) can serve many people, especially if they are hungry for the information being provided. And to a totalitarian state, the Internet is a double fright because it can be simultaneously intensely private and endlessly public, a terror because it operates unseen at both levels. Had 10,000 Falun Gong supporters not suddenly appeared as if by magic in April outside the private residence compound of the Chinese leadership in Beijing, where they proceeded to conduct their peaceful meditative exercises, who would have known the breadth of the movement's reach?

This is a profoundly disturbing discovery for China or any country where there are still unsettled and potentially dangerous political questions about the pace and direction of modernization. Most governments are aware of the need to liberalize the flow of information in order to attract international business and to secure a place in the global economy. International lending organizations are demanding data once withheld by secretive governments.

"The Chinese Government has made the decision that it wants to continue to advance information technology," said Ms. Economy. "They recognize the challenges that it is going to pose for them, but they think that it is too important to their economic modernization to stop. What they are trying to do obviously is to control it."

But to counter the threat, the Government is still falling back on old techniques. For the Chinese Communist Party to compete in the open marketplace of ideas is still anathema. Furthermore, what if independent trade unions or other groups start to organize through the Internet? Re-education, a Maoist method of mind control also recently resurrected widely in Tibet, is now as out of date as the doctored newsreel or the propagandistic "documentary" used by Fascists and Communists alike to drum up pride in the state and its ruler.

Few countries can opt out of the technological revolution, though even the United States sees a need to police it in order to protect national security. Only a regime like Saddam Hussein's in Iraq, which really wants only to sell oil, not establish a modern business environment, can enforce a ban on Internet use under a pervasive reign of terror. In any case, international sanctions have reduced Iraq's telephone service to a ludicrous level, cutting off until very recently those who might have tried to evade restrictions in their hunger for information from the outside world.

Vietnam, clinging to a Communist political-control mindset, has been ambivalent on the issue of technology without borders. India, a democracy and a software exporter, tried at first to monopolize Internet connections but gave up under public pressure for better services. By contrast in Singapore, where one party has dominated politics ruthlessly, but where educated people are recognized as the nation's most valuable

natural resource (and foreign companies are welcomed), Internet access has been made simple.

When historians look back on the latter part of the 20th century, they may be tempted in the short term to see it as an era that rendered Orwell passe, an age when exploding technology ended the possibility of totalitarian thought control — at least until dictators or new mind-closing movements devise new methods of isolating people. There are already fears that racist hate groups or new age religious cults with authoritarian or apocalyptic tendencies are getting ahead of the deprogramming organizations that try to rescue members trapped in mind-altering sects. But on balance, many experts would bet on more opening of minds through interconnectedness.

In the Muslim world, the use of mass communications — including the Internet as well as a new generation of smuggled tapes and the open discussion encouraged by Qatar's pioneering Al-Jazira satellite television network — is aiding a significant if still disparate movement for re-examination of the basic precepts and writings of Islam.

"The result is a collapse of earlier, hierarchical notions of religious authority based on claims to the mastery of fixed bodies of religious texts," Dale F. Eickelman, a Dartmouth anthropologist, said in June in the 1999 Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. "Quite simply, in country after country, government officials, traditional religious scholars and officially sanctioned preachers are finding it very hard to monopolize the tools of literate culture. The days have gone when governments and religious authorities can control what their people know, and what they think."

At the same time, it is probably worth remembering that the early totalitarians based a lot of their strategy on mastering what was then cutting-edge communications technology. Manipulating film images and broadcasting propaganda were essential to their efforts to imprison rather than liberate people's imaginations. So their heirs in China may be right to have a special fear of a new, barely understood medium like the Internet — and of any organization clever enough to master this newest technology.

And for the West, the extraordinary success that the Falun Gong has had with cyberspace challenges any optimism that the Internet will promote only rational, enlightened, open-minded patterns of thought.

ACCESSIBLE communications, Professor Eickelman and others say, foster the growth of civil society and strengthen dissent in places like Iran or Egypt. But in Muslim nations, as almost everywhere in the world at the century's end, there is still a race on between the forces of liberalizing change and those of reactionary fundamentalism, between those who would expand tolerance and those who preach hate, between the agents of mind control and advocates of a free exchange of political ideas.

"It is important to remember that the Internet can serve government's purposes, too," said Ms. Economy. "It's not always going to be a force for positive change from our perspective."

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New York Times, August 1, 1999, Section 4, Page 1.
<nytimes.com/1999/08/01/weekinreview/the-world-out-of-control-the-internet-
changes-dictatorship-s-rules.html>

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