


December 5, 2007

PORTALS

Bloggers In China Start Testing Limits Of 'Mental Firewall'

By GEOFFREY A. FOWLER
 December 5, 2007; Page B1

*Beijing***DOW JONES REPRINTS**

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The respected Chinese blogger Hong Bo, known as Keso, last week posted a question to an online discussion forum in China. "If one day Taiwan goes independent," he wrote, "what harm will it do to us?"

That is a sensitive topic in a country that still treats Taiwan as a breakaway province. Shortly after Keso raised the point, the discussion was cut short. His online censor wasn't the notorious "Great Firewall of China," the filtering software put in place by the Chinese government to stifle online dissent. Rather, Keso was reprimanded by another writer in the general-interest forum. "No discussion of politics here!" his fellow netizen insisted.

"In China, people are not in the habit of expressing their ideas very publicly," says Keso.

Well-meaning free-speech advocates outside China develop anticensorship software. Companies that cooperate with China's technical censorship regime are hauled before lawmakers for rebuke. (Last month, Yahoo CEO Jerry Yang was berated by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee for sharing information with the Chinese government that led to the jailing of a journalist.)

Inside China, however, some of the smartest thinkers about the Internet believe the biggest hurdle to free speech in China isn't technical, it's social.

China's 162 million Internet users are a largely young and wealthy set who typically aren't engaged in politics. Most don't seem intent on accessing the sort of content that would upset the authorities. They are busy amassing virtual weapons in online games and posting photos to blogs.

But when content does get political, the government doesn't have to do all the censoring itself. Behind the Great Firewall, it relies on Internet companies to take down content that might offend the party or risk their business licenses.

A third line is self-censorship. Isaac Mao, a blogging pioneer in China, has dubbed this problem China's "mental firewall."

"The big problem in China now is free thinking," says Mr. Mao.

China's Confucian values teach respect for authority and the subordination of the individual to the family and state. In China's rigid education system, young people rarely are encouraged to express their opinions. And people have learned to keep quiet as political orthodoxies changed with the wind over the decades, with leaders coming into power, then falling out of favor as new regimes installed themselves. Finding yourself on the wrong side could lead to punishment, including exile and jail.

"It's tricky, because self-censorship has helped to protect people," says Mr. Mao. But he adds that these self-imposed restrictions are stifling expression and, in the long run, his society's development.

"There was a kind of fish that lived deep in the ocean," says the blogger Keso. "It did not use its eyes very often, since it was used to the darkness there. So its eyesight degenerated gradually, until one day it became blind."

Mr. Mao and others think that over time, the social-networking capabilities of the Internet will help Chinese people become more assertive about speaking their minds. Young Chinese have already made the Internet an integral part of their lives. It opens opportunities for them to express individuality and emotion in a way that didn't exist before. A recent survey by media company IAC and ad agency JWT found that 73% of Chinese Internet users age 16 to 25 felt they could do and say things online that they couldn't in the real world. (In the U.S., only 32% felt that way.)

When those young people share information through social media such as blogs and instant messaging, it carries one big advantage the state-controlled media don't enjoy: trust. Readers believe what is written by a friend or a blogger they follow.

This is especially true for discussions on local topics, such as traffic problems or polluted creeks. Earlier this year, a Chinese blogger named Zola reported on a homeowner who refused to vacate to make way for a new development. Before the government could control the story in the mainstream media, Zola's report was shared by thousands online. But these discussions happen less frequently on the bigger, more sensitive issues, such as Tibetan dissent or human rights -- topics that get the attention of the government (and foreigners).

In 2004, Mr. Mao, who is also vice president of a Shanghai venture-capital firm, helped found the nonprofit group Social Brain Foundation. The goal, he says, is to "use social media to transmit messages to people in a trusted way," through support for new technology and conferences.

In theory, he explains, a wide online social network in China could move information from one person to the next faster than any technology could shut it down. "We strongly believe that if we build a social norm where people collaborate and trust each other," Mr. Mao says, "the country can be better."

--Juliet Ye in Hong Kong contributed to this column.

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Lee Gomes is on vacation.

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