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China traps online dissent

By Mure Dickie
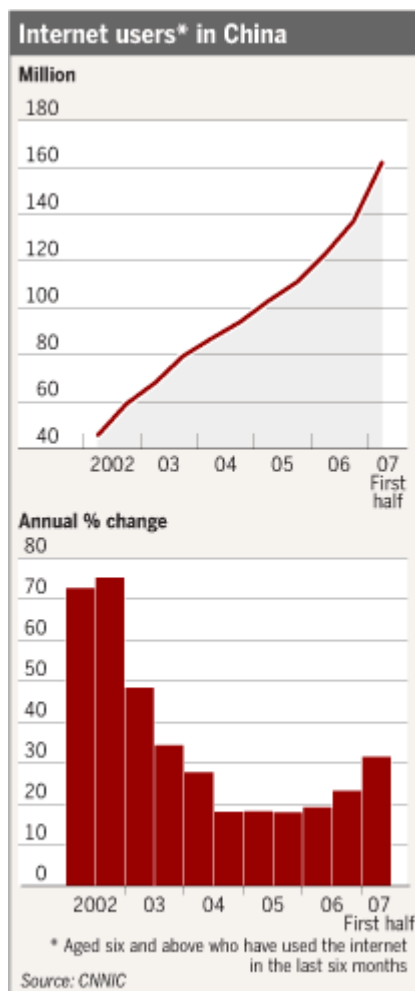Published: November 12 2007 19:32 | Last updated: November 12 2007 19:32

Ever since the internet arrived in China in the mid-1990s, many have assumed that it poses an unanswerable threat to the sprawling system of political censorship that helps underpin the ruling Communist party's power.

Such confidence was memorably summed up in 2000 by Bill Clinton, then US president, who predicted that liberty would spread unstoppably in the 21st century "by cell phone and cable modem". "There's no question China has been trying to crack down on the internet," Mr Clinton said. "Good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall."

These days, however, it is not jelly but blithe optimism in the liberating power of technology that is being nailed to the wall. Far from being overwhelmed by the information age, China's Communist party censors have proved surprisingly adept at blunting its political challenge – and even, in some cases, at turning its technologies into powerful new tools for their regime.

While the internet is transforming the way people in China access and share information – just as it is everywhere – Beijing has proved able effectively to muster government and commercial resources to ensure that direct dissent is curtailed, analysts say. "The early idealists and companies and governments have all assumed that the internet will bring freedom. Yet China proves that this is not the case," says Rebecca MacKinnon, an expert in new media at the University of Hong Kong's Journalism and Media Studies Centre.

The success so far enjoyed by China's political censors has implications far beyond the world's most populous nation. It offers encouragement to other one-party states that know the world wide web is an essential ingredient in economic development but fear its promise of unfettered information flow.

Internet users* in China
Million
Source: CNNIC
* Aged six and above who have used the internet in the last six months

Beijing's internet controls also raise deep moral issues for western democracies, whose capital markets help fund the local enterprises that make the censorship system work and whose own multinationals have tailored their operations in China to avoid upsetting the party commissars.

Those issues have been highlighted this month by US congressional hearings at which Yahoo, the internet portal, has been strongly criticised for helping Chinese authorities track down local dissidents.

For companies and individuals alike, understanding Chinese online political censorship is made more difficult by the secrecy in which it is shrouded. Officials routinely deny that it happens at all. "As I understand it, the censorship of websites or online content is completely impossible," says Wang Guoqing, vice-minister of the State Council Information Office, the government body responsibile for media monitoring.

But top leaders have left no doubt that controlling the web is a political priority. "Whether or not we can actively use and effectively manage the internet . . . will affect national cultural information security and the long-term stability of the state," Hu Jintao, China's president, told a meeting of the Communist party's governing Politburo in January. It was necessary to "purify the internet environment".

In practice, censorship is built into the very structure of China's internet, which is separated from the global network by a handful of carefully

controlled gateways generally referred to as the "Great Firewall", or "GFW" to the geeks.

Like the firewalls installed on PCs, the GFW does not seek to block all traffic but to guard against specific threats – in this case, the information contained in thousands of websites ranging from the home page of the banned Falun Gong sect to the Chinese news pages of the BBC.

Beijing never discusses which overseas websites it is blocking or why. Blocks are often unpredictable and sometimes temporary or partial. Chinese-language sites are targeted more than foreign-language counterparts and those that directly challenge Communist rule are the most carefully blocked.

While the GFW protects the government from information assault from without, internally another system applies. Vaguely worded laws against any speech judged seditious, superstitious or merely "harmful to social order" give officials wide discretion to punish those who post or host sensitive content. But the main burden of routine censorship is left to internet service providers and suppliers of content.

Local companies that emulate Google's YouTube by offering online video hosting, for example, must screen every submission from their users or risk fines or even closure. "We have someone doing this around the clock," says one executive at one of China's online video sites, adding that a special watch is kept for content promoting independence for Taiwan or Tibet and for any mention of the brutal 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. "We know not to let anything on the site about 'The Three Ts'," the executive says.

Local arms of the State Council Information Office or the Communist party's shadowy propaganda department also frequently contact internet companies with more detailed guidance on what is permissible or with orders for the removal of objectionable content already online. "They usually call pretty often to say what information cannot be distributed, or to point out information that violates the government's rules," says a manager at another video hosting site.

The same approach is taken with blog services, discussion boards and even online fantasy games, where company "game masters" must watch for any discussion of banned political topics between characters playing warriors, mages or monsters. Surveillance extends to internet cafes, with authorities pushing operators to keep watch on customers' activities by using technology that records their every key stroke.

The penalties for breaking the deliberately vague boundaries set by the censors vary greatly. An online game player who discusses a recent public protest is likely to receive no more than a warning from his game master or at worst see his avatar sentenced to a few hours in a virtual prison. Blog posters have their blogs disabled and discussion board contributors see their posts deleted. The authorities sometimes order the dismissal of managers and editors of internet portals that let suspect content through.

Controls are tightened around the sensitive anniversaries of incidents – such as June 4 for the Tiananmen crackdown – and political events including the recent congress of the Communist party. In a show of force ahead of the five-yearly congress, authorities ordered whole internet data centres to shut, abruptly forcing thousands of their customers' websites offline.

Censors can also call on more traditional tools of authoritarian rule. Web users who persist in posting highly sensitive views or information can expect a visit from the police or the state security agency. Dozens of people are in detention around China because of political writings they distributed online. Shi Tao, the Yahoo e-mail user who was one of a handful highlighted at last week's US Congress hearing, was jailed for 10 years in 2005 for forwarding 4 internet news controls to an overseas website. information about June

While Beijing's censorship methods are broad-based and multi-layered, its success in part depends on not trying to control too much. The internet remains by far China's freest public media space. Online discussion can have important social and political consequences, as when the controversy over the killing of a migrant in 2003 led to the scrapping of rules that allowed police to detain vagrants at will.

The party long since gave up any attempt at the kind of total ideological thought control sought by Mao Zedong after the 1949 revolution. Relative cultural freedom is seen as a way to keep the population happy and entertained. Limited and positive public "supervision" of government work is welcome.

Yet the commissars are quick to silence online controversies if they appear likely to challenge government legitimacy itself or to fuel wider discontent. "The goal is to keep the Communist party in power," says Ms MacKinnon. "The moment you see anything that starts to point to political protest, then – boom! – they clamp down."

The result is that the vast majority of China's 162m internet users are unlikely to be exposed to anything the state might consider politically dangerous. Prof Zhang Junhua of Zhejiang University says the party has been successful in creating a "collective memory" among young people that means the official versions of events such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown go largely unchallenged. "I would say that, consciously or unconsciously, Chinese bloggers have got used to the 'red line' drawn by the [Communist party]," Prof Zhang says. "This is exactly one of the reasons of why China remains so stable regardless of immense problems."

Many users do try to test the limits, by addressing topics obliquely or seeking the most permissive nooks of the web to air their thoughts. Some dare to challenge internet companies directly over their censorship: Liu Xiaoyuan, a lawyer, this year launched a rare local lawsuit against the Nasdaq-listed Sohu.com after the portal repeatedly censored his blog. But a Beijing court rejected the case in August and local media have ignored it.

"Although the constitution grants us freedom of speech, there are no clear rules for exercising that right either in the constitution or the law," Mr Liu wrote in a blog entry about his decision to push ahead with the suit. "I've already appealed, but I'm not optimistic."

In its effort to tame the web, Beijing has benefited from broad technology trends often overlooked by idealists who hope networks will always empower the individual. Certainly, the internet and the spread of computers and mobile phones let ordinary people communicate on an unprecedented scale. Dissidents who once relied on hand-printed leaflets can reach large audiences by e-mail and blog postings.

But communications equipment suppliers are now offering products that grant those who control a mobile phone or data network equally unprecedented knowledge of what its individual users are doing. Ever cheaper computing power and memory capacity mean network managers can monitor huge numbers of users for particular kinds of behaviour or store records of their activity for later analysis.

Such capabilities can allow companies to offer improved services for their users, but they also have huge appeal for any government that wants to crack down on terrorists, criminals or simply pro-democracy activists. Under regulations issued by Chinese police in 2006, internet service providers must keep a record of the online activity of all their users – including log-in names, passwords and every website visited – for at least two months.

Police in the eastern Jiangsu province recently boasted of their success in tracking down more than 60 people who spread "rumours, deceptions or offensive messages" via the internet or mobile phone text messages – including culprits in faraway Sichuan. Topsec, one of China's top network security technology companies, says its products have helped police silence proponents of the banned Falun Gong.

China need not rely on domestic technology. Cisco of the US has drawn criticism for supplying Beijing with its powerful network control tools. Asked this month whether he was concerned about the way Cisco's products were used in China, John Chambers, chairman and chief executive, appeared untroubled. "One thing technology companies cannot do, in my opinion, is involve themselves in politics within a country," he said.

Propagandists are meanwhile making full use of new media, ensuring official accounts of big events have prominence on news sites, arranging for "positive" opinions to be posted on discussion boards and sending individual messages to mobile phone users.

Some visitors to Tiananmen Square have even received a text message of welcome from the "management committee" of the politically sensitive plaza. "Please consciously preserve the order and environment of the Square," the message says.

Beijing's control is hardly total. Tech-savvy surfers can use proxy servers to get around the Great Firewall. Blogs banned in one place often pop up again elsewhere. Meanwhile, the commercialisation of the media and the proliferation of online information are changing China in ways that may eventually undermine one-party rule.

For the moment, however, the censors' electronic scissors remain sharp. The party's "propaganda apparatus has been revitalised in recent years and remains fully capable of controlling the content of information that reaches the public *when it decides to do so*", wrote David Shambaugh, professor of political science at George Washington University, in an essay this year.

Such a verdict will disappoint internet true believers. It suggests freedom of speech and information will not be bestowed on China by some inevitable technological trend and that the future of state censorship depends more on the decisions made by government officials, corporate executives and ordinary citizens. This should not come as a surprise. Liberty, after all, is seldom easily won.

'We are truly sorry to have removed your article'

Type the wrong word into an international internet search engine from China and suddenly your connection is cut for a moment, leaving the browser blank. Then your e-mail account stops working when somebody tries to send you the wrong kind of message.

Welcome to the Great Firewall, where an unseen "net nanny" labours to ensure that China's ruling Communist party never ends up as roadkill on the information superhighway.

Unpredictable and for many users infuriating, Beijing's secret effort to control the internet and wireless networks is aimed at stopping the wrong kind of information winning a broad audience among the 162m Chinese already online.

Electronic filters scan internet search traffic across the "GFW" for hundreds of such politically sensitive Chinese words and phrases as "dictatorship", "the right to strike" or "savage torture". E-mails with too many problem words are sometimes not delivered or prove impossible to download from overseas servers, freezing an account until they are deleted.

Similar filters are installed on blog sites and instant messaging services, allowing authorities to both monitor and disrupt online conversations. Some blog sites brusquely reject attempts to post "forbidden speech". Others are more polite. Responding to a blog posting about the banned Falun Gong sect – which China considers a pernicious cult – China's leading internet portal is highly apologetic. "For various reasons, we have placed your post 'Falun Gong' in your recycle bin," says an automated message from the portal, Sina.com. "We are truly sorry to have removed your article without your prior permission."

The Nasdaq-listed Sina has little choice but to bar politically suspect content. Blog hosts are often punished for suspect content uncovered by the propaganda departments and police agencies that quietly monitor online activity.

On some parts of the web, the police presence is very public. Two years ago, law enforcers in southern Shenzhen deployed cartoon-style virtual officers dubbed Jingjing and Chacha to patrol the city's websites and let "users know the police are watching them". Similar squads are being put in place in more than 100 cities.

Only a small proportion of internet content is ever targeted. For the vast majority of entertainment-oriented users, the censorship efforts go largely unnoticed – at least until a popular overseas service such as Google's YouTube is blocked. Even then, however, there is always a similar local – and safely censored – alternative. Sometimes users feel they are being pushed towards local companies: many recently found attempts to access Microsoft's Hotmail service were redirected to the website of Nasdaq-listed but Beijing-based Baidu.

Such phenomena lead some to speculate that censorship is often aimed at giving Chinese websites a commercial edge. It is also one reason why Google felt it had to offer a local – censored – search engine as well as its unfiltered but GFW-harassed service.

Users do sometimes grow angry. Although the more directly phrased expressions of outrage are in general quickly deleted, coded complaints abound. One noted blogger offers visitors the chance to stick virtual pins in a voodoo doll picture labelled: "This is the person who rendered Google inaccessible." The "harmonious society" policy pushed by Hu Jintao, China's president, is mocked when users say deleted posts or blogs have been "harmonised".

Some foreign business people visiting China say they find the internet much less censored than they expected. Indeed, Beijing is careful to focus its efforts mainly on local language content, confident that the counter-revolution will not be English-speaking.