Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion?

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Drawing on recent survey data, digital ethnography and comparative analysis, this article presents a critical re-appraisal of the interactive blogosphere in China and its effects on Chinese social and political life. Focused on the discursive and behaviorist trends of Chinese netizens rather than the ubiquitous information control/resistance paradigm, it argues that the Sinophone blogosphere is producing the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world, and these more prosaic elements need to be considered alongside the Chinese internet’s potential for creating new forms of civic activism and socio-political change.

With 457 million users today and an estimated 650 million by 2015, the Sinophone internet is now the world’s largest cyber-community, where netizens (wangmin 网民) spend 44 percent of their free time (CNNIC 2011; TNS 2008). Despite the growing literature and hype surrounding the global “blogging revolution,” China’s 181 million bloggers have attracted little attention compared to their counterparts in North America and now the Arab world. This is despite the fact that there are now nearly three times as many active blog sites in China (329 million in 2009) as the 133 million largely English-language blogs indexed by the US-based monitoring service Technorati since 2002 (CNNIC 2009; Winn 2009).

More to the point, academic analysis of the internet in China has become bogged down in the ubiquitous yet increasing stale debate between digital-activism and cyber-censorship—the good versus evil struggle between the internet’s liberating potential and the Chinese party-state’s ongoing efforts at thought-control. Underpinned by the circular logic of technological determinism, this debate impedes us from asking equally interesting and far more complex questions about how online information and technologies are re-constituting Chinese society and identity. By moving beyond the information control/resistance paradigm, we can begin to explore how a range of different actors are deploying these new social spaces and informational flows to reshape public
and private life in contemporary China. China watchers now tend to agree that the internet has both expanded and altered the discursive terrain of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) while allowing its citizens to mobilize in new ways. What remains unclear, however, is the precise socio-political consequences of these changes. Positioned here, this Trends article presents a critical re-appraisal of the interactive blogosphere and its effects on Chinese society. My analysis is one focused on the discourse and behavior of Chinese netizens rather than the efforts of the Chinese party-state or private enterprise to influence their thoughts and actions.

The growing convergence of online technologies makes any differentiation based on functionality increasingly problematic, with individual sites now embedding multimedia, search, e-commerce, social networking, and blog features. In their special issue on the blogosphere, Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell (2008, 2) provide the following definition of web-based blogs or weblogs: “a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources.” This definition is broad enough to incorporate the different functionalities and uses of two distinct yet related types of user-generation content in Chinese cyberspace: personal blogs or microblogs (referred to as boke 博客 or weiboke 微博客 in Chinese) and community-based web forums (known as bulletin board systems, BBS, or luntan 论坛 in Chinese). Both mediums provide a dynamic platform for asynchronous, interactive information sharing and discussion on a wide variety of topics. Taken together weblogs represent the single largest, and most dynamic, communication platform on the Chinese internet, providing unprecedented opportunities for netizens to both engage in national-level debate and indulge their personal fetishes in isolated, interest-based enclaves.

To date, analysts writing in English have painted a generally rosy assessment of the impact of the blogosphere on Chinese society. These range from those who speak of a “communication revolution” (Yang 2009, 213), “political liberalization” (Zheng 2007, 167), or a “gradual, slow evolution” (MacKinnon 2008, 45). Others posit that the Chinese internet is “a platform for bottom-up information and public debate” (Zhou 2009, 1006) and “a new channel for individual expression” (Shen et al. 2009, 470), which either “democratizes communication of information in Chinese society” (Tai 2006, 289), “promote[s] political openness, transparency, and accountability” (Zheng 2007, 186), “erode[s] the CCP’s ideological and social control” (Xiao 2011, 223) or “challenges the mainstream culture” through its “playful (mis)use (and often juxtaposition) of the available resources” (Yu 2007, 429). Playing on one of Chairman Mao’s famous revolutionary phrases, Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist Nicholas Kristof (2006) declared that a “single blog can start a prairie fire,” arguing that the unprecedented free speech in the Chinese blogosphere threatens to eventually topple the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from power. Even the euphemistic “harmonizing” (bei hexie le 被
and forced closure, of Kristof’s own Chinese-language blog on Sina.com failed to dampen his confidence, when he boldly announced this year: “the internet will one day be remembered as helping to transform China, byte by byte. Let a billion blogs bloom” (Kristof 2011).

In sharp contrast, research and debate on the political impact of the internet in the West has been more robust and wide-ranging in its focus, and far more cautious in its conclusions. Many commentators continue to defend the innately empowering nature of new communication technologies, as first sketched out by Alvin Toffler and others in their 1994 manifesto “Cyberspace and the American Dream” (Dyson et al. 1996; see also Negroponte 1996; Benkler 2006; Shirky 2008). Yet, new empirical evidence and theoretical intervention have complicated this picture. In The Myth of Digital Democracy, Matthew Hindman (2008) demonstrates how blogging remains a narrow, elite pursuit, which does little to increase the representative basis of American politics, while Cass Sunstein (2007) has shown how blogging can actually fragment and polarize speech communities. Evgeny Morozov’s provocative new book The Net Delusion provides a forceful critique of the naïve assumption that Google, Facebook and Twitter will bring down authoritarian regimes like China with a few clicks of the mouse, suggesting that in many authoritarian countries the internet actually “empowers the strong and disempowers the weak” (Morozov 2011, xvii). Recent events in the Arab world and corresponding calls for a similar “Jasmine Revolution” in China have intensified the debate (Coll 2011; Wasserstrom 2011).

But beyond the well-developed literature on internet censorship in China (see for example, Tsui 2003; Lagerkvist 2006; MacKinnon 2009; Jiang 2010), few studies have fully probed those elements of Chinese cyberculture that might be working against positive social change. Like other technologies, the internet is normatively neutral and socially malleable and, depending on the particular context and pre-existing social patterns, can function as a force for both good and evil. While any definitive assessment of the Chinese blogosphere awaits more detailed, empirical research, I will argue that much of the optimism that pervades current writing on the Chinese internet seems premature and possibly misplaced. Drawing on surveys of online usage, comparative research and my own personal engagement with the Chinese internet, this article suggests that the Chinese-language blogosphere is producing the same sort of shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world.

Blogging isn’t the same as bowling. And clearly holds the potential to link individuals and communities in revolutionary new ways—counteracting the worldwide decline in civic engagement identified by Robert Putman (2000) and other sociologists. But before declaring that the Sinophone internet and weblogs are “changing the rules of the game between society and the state” and contributing to an unprecedented “power shift in Chinese society” (Xiao 2011, 203, 222), we need to explore the complex and countervailing ways that
sitting alone in front of our blinking screens can both connect and disconnect us from others; alter and perpetuate long-standing patterns of socio-political engagement.

**Digital Opium: Chinese Weblogs and their Uses**

At present, the Chinese internet is chiefly an *intranet* of playful self-expression and identity exhibition. Survey data reveals that Chinese bloggers, like others around the globe, are motivated by the desire to “record one’s own feelings/emotions” (64%) and “express one’s opinions” (37%) (CNNIC 2009, 27; see also Yangzi and Pugsley 2010; Wallis 2011). Among Chinese forum users, 67 percent employ them to “discuss matters of common interest” and 49 percent to “share life experiences” (iResearch 2007a). These surveys have repeatedly found that entertainment and socializing rather than “hard news” retrieval, political activism and social criticism dominates Chinese internet usage, while linguistic and router barriers ensure that most netizens consume only locally produced and vetted content. According to CNNIC’s most recent survey, the leading uses of the internet in China are: search (82%), music (79%), news (77%), instant messaging (77%), and gaming (67%) (CNNIC 2011, 31). The dominance of soft infotainment led Chinese Academy of Social Sciences researcher Guo Liang to suggest that the Chinese internet functions more like an “entertainment highway,” rather than the promised “information superhighway” (Guo 2007, 36).

Much of this online amusement takes place on interactive weblogs, with 64 percent of Chinese netizens using blogs, 32 percent BBS forums, and 14 percent micro-blogs (CNNIC 2011, 31). Most of China’s leading websites, including even the eBay clone Taobao, incorporate some sort of weblog alongside their other functions. Given the sheer size of the Sinophone internet, its not surprising that 1.6 billion weblog pages are viewed and 10 million new posts are written each day (Jin 2008, 11). Most of these pages are filled with the ephemeral waxing of quotidian life—discussing travel plans, telling jokes, sharing photos, searching for jobs, pursuing love interests, and gossiping about sports, entertainment and news—and here Chinese netizens are no different from their global counterparts (iResearch 2007b). But occasionally, discussion reaches a more serious level and can redirect public attention and anger at the state and political actors in the real world, empowering ordinary netizens to shape and, in some limited cases, alter government policies, as was the case with the now infamous arrest and custody death of migrant student Sun Zhigang in 2003 (Zheng 2007, 147–51; Yang 2009, 34–35).

Empirical studies have shown, that unlike mainstream television and newspapers in China, weblogs contain information that is both critical and divergent from party-state propaganda (Esarey and Xiao 2011). But political content
comprises only an extremely tiny portion of China’s cyber-cacophony—an important point that is rarely noted in the scholarly and journalistic literature on the Chinese internet. Film and fashion starlets Zhang Ziyi and Zhao Wei return more results on China’s leading search engine Baidu than the “national father” Sun Yat-sen and nearly as many as current CCP Secretary General Hu Jintao, and a staggering 361 million netizens have visited the web forum dedicated to discussing Supergirl star Li Yuchun at the Baidu Post Bar (baidu tieba 百度贴吧) BBS site, leaving 56 million posts in 2.8 million different threads.1 During the last week of March 2011, to take another example, the two most popular search terms on Baidu were the South Korean serial drama Temptation of Wife (huijia de youhuo 回家的诱惑) and the serialized online fantasy novel Smashing the Universe (doupo cangqiong 斗破苍穹), which attracted nearly 40 times more searches than the Japanese earthquake/tsunami and the Libyan conflict combine.2

Matthew Hindman (2008, 60–1) has demonstrated how political websites in America comprise only 0.12 percent of overall web traffic, and remain dominated by highly educated, white men. This compares to around 10 percent for pornographic content, web-mail, and search. With the exception of hardcore pornography, the Sinophone internet is little different. Entertainment, sports, relationship and investment-related sites dominate China’s largest weblog portals: with stock market guru Xu Xiaoming and his metrics-based system for striking it rich topping the Sina blog chart with 1.6 billion hits over the last five years; the site maintained by pop psychologist Su Qin attracting over 501 million hits on the QQ blog since 2007; and television actress Yao Chen being the most popular individual (with nearly 12 million “fans”) on China’s new Twitter-like micro-blog platform Sina Weibo.3 Given these figures, it should come as no surprise that Chinese netizens are not only generally apathetic about discussing politics online but also highly supportive of government controls in cyberspace (Liang and Lu 2010, 109).

To date, much of the Anglophone analysis of the Chinese blogosphere has focused on the ability of Chinese bloggers to influence or check state action, serving as both a source of public criticism and increased accountability. This watchdog function needs to be balanced, however, with these more plebeian uses of the web. Here Baidu’s daily top search terms are revealing: at times they are serious—“housing prices in first tier cities fall” (yixian chengshi fangjia xiajiang 一线城市房价下降), but more often they provide a window into the salacious—“third wave of [sexy] Pan Shuangshuang photos” (Pan shuangshuang di sanbo zhaopian

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1A 26 October 2010 search on Baidu (www.baidu.com) returned the following results: Hu Jintao (78,200,000), Zhao Wei (61,700,000), Zhang Ziyi (55,900,000), Sun Yat-sen (37,700,000). Li Yuchun’s forum can be found at http://tieba.baidu.com/gift/f/dir?id=1.

2A list of the most popular keyword searches on Baidu can be found at http://top.baidu.com/.

the mundane—“flights between Wuhan and Nanjing cancelled” (wuhan nanjing tingfei 武汉南京停飞) —and the bizarre—“tongue bitten off during kiss” (jiewen yaodiao shetou 接吻咬掉舌头). In contrast to those that argue the internet is empowering ordinary citizens, many inside China worry that the web is peddling a new “digital opium” (dianzi yapian 电子鸦片): one that threatens to undermine the spiritual and cultural “quality” (suzhi 素质) of Chinese youths without proper regulation (Hao and Pang 2006; Ye 2007).

In authoritarian countries like China, the stakes of this sort of digital escapism are high. Killing time on the net, Evgeny Morozov (2011) warns, helps to depoliticize large segments of the population, and without a free media and civic organizations that can openly criticize those in power, net surfing can actually strengthen the ruling party and its elite. With its low barrier to entry, the Sinophone internet is a raucous place. But critical voices can easily get lost within this echo chamber of banality. Fax-machines and satellite television did little to tear down the Iron Curtin in Europe, and the Internet now provides Chinese netizens with even more diverse and far more engrossing ways to distract and dampen any subversive thoughts and actions.

Crossed Wires: Rethinking the Impact of Weblogs on Chinese Society

Few have studied the Chinese internet as closely and carefully as Guobin Yang. In his landmark study, The Power of the Internet in China, Yang (2009) provides the single most comprehensive survey of the Sinophone internet to date. While his analysis is both critical and wide-ranging, a deep sense of optimism underlies his argument. In the concluding chapter, “China’s long revolution,” Yang speaks of “a restive society alive with conflict and contention” (p. 209) and one that is ultimately moving in a positive direction—one marked by “the palpable revival of the revolutionary spirit” (p. 209), and the forging of “the social and cultural foundations for a democratic political system” (p. 214). Central to Yang’s argument is the conviction that the internet (and weblogs in particular) have opened up new spaces for competing viewpoints, creating a sort of “digital civil society,” which “can challenge cultural stereotypes, correct misinformation, and resist symbolic violence (symbolic violence meaning violence inflicted on society by the ruling elites through labeling, categorization, and other discursive forms)” (p. 216), and even without formal institutional reform, “this communication revolution is expanding citizens’ unofficial democracy” by undermining state control and generating greater political transparency (p. 213).

China-based new media scholar Zhou Xiang is equally buoyant about the power of China’s blogosphere to democratize public discourse. Providing a qualitative content analysis of posts related to the controversial dismissal of Shanghai
CCP boss Chen Liangyu on the popular NetEase blog (网易博客 www.163.com), Zhou concludes that bloggers’ responses “paint a relatively promising picture of the blogosphere as a platform for personal expression in political discussion and online civic messages from diverse perspectives, relatively independent of official media” (Zhou 2009, 1016). Despite the fact that only 13 percent of the posts analyzed adopted an explicitly critical attitude of the government’s actions, Zhou argues that this small number is still “very meaningful” due to “the heavy censorship imposed on mainstream news media.”

This is part of the “blog revolution” that Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the University of California at Berkeley and its widely read China Digital Times (CDT) website, claims is sweeping China, and “shaking up the power balance between the people and the government of the world’s most populous nation” (Xiao 2004). By using code-words, satire, humor, and other rhetorical techniques, Chinese bloggers are “speaking truth to each other, and by doing so in a widely accessible manner, are speaking truth to power,” representing “a major breakthrough toward the formation of a Chinese public sphere, albeit a virtual one” (Esarey and Xiao 2008, 753, 755). Others have argued that blogging represents more “light-hearted resistance through playful collective action,” but one still capable of challenging mainstream culture through less overtly political but equally empowering social critiques (Yu 2007, 431). Here egao 恶搞 (online parody, or literally “evil work”) is often celebrated as an “alternative locus of power,” one that “playfully subverts a range of authoritative discourses and provides a vehicle for both comic criticism and emotional catharsis” (Gong and Yang 2010, 4).

A less sanguine Rebecca MacKinnon noted in 2005 that the internet and weblogs in particular are a new tool for political expression but also require offline causes to reach their full potential. Furthermore, the ultimate impact of interactive media in China “will depend not only how people choose to use them but also to what extent the Chinese government succeeds in controlling the use of weblogs for political dissent” (MacKinnon 2005, 34). Despite noting the growing sophistication of the state’s censorship regime and the declining use of proxy servers and other technologies to circumvent the so-called Great Firewall of China, MacKinnon seems to share the long-term optimism of the professional blogging community in China and abroad—the power of what new media scholar Zhu Ying terms the emerging “critical masses” to keep the party-state in check through increased transparency and thus accountability (Zhu and Robinson 2010). MacKinnon concludes:

In the longer term, the space for civil discourse is quietly deepening, thanks to blogs and other forms of online citizens’ media. And it appears that every inch of that space is being actively and cleverly utilized. If this civil discourse in Chinese cyberspace continues to mature, deepen and develop, that leads to a number of intriguing questions:
Over the course of a generation, will a new group of Chinese emerge who have grown up debating public affairs, engaging in critical thinking and respecting the sanctity of the individual in ways that were not possible before? Will this new generation who have grown up using blogs and other forms of online participatory media be much more ready for reasoned self-governance than the current generation? (MacKinnon 2005, 44)

MacKinnon’s questions are good ones. But they still rest on a set of assumptions about the internet’s ability to foster robust public debate, critical and rational thinking and the sort of participatory individualism that is fundamental to Western-style democracy, what Yang describes as “a place for demanding democratic supervision and independent thinking” (Yang 2009, 110). This sort of digital-utopianism permeated much of the early literature on the internet in the West, such as Howard Rheingold’s “virtual community” or Stewart Brand’s often quoted axiom “information wants to be free” (Rheingold 1993; Brand 1987, 202). But now a new generation of commentators are starting to question these assumptions.

Among China scholars, Jens Damm (2007) has perceptively argued that the internet is leading to the spatial fragmentation and localization of Chinese society, creating numerous “isolated niches,” in which people explore their own narrow identities and interests with like-minded individuals. Moreover, a recent interpretation of survey data on Chinese internet usage suggests that the repressive political culture in China helps to explain why most netizens avoid “sensitive topics and are only involved in discussing trivial and mawkish topics” (Fei 2009, 469). Yet, Damm’s claim that the commercialization of the Chinese internet has rendered most online discourse trivial and apolitical seems to be only part of the full picture. As the work of Yang and numerous other scholars have demonstrated, highly politicized and critical speech—in a variety of forms—does permeate certain quarters of the Chinese internet. We would be foolish to completely dismiss the inherently political and potentially subversive nature of internet speech (regardless of how oblique it is) in a society where both the education system and the mainstream media remain highly controlled. Yet, at the same time, it is important to note that political speech does not always promote greater openness, tolerance and civic-mindedness, and that liberalization and greater expression, as Hindman (2008, 1–19) and Morozov (2010, 47) warn, do not necessarily lead to greater political participation and democratization.

Networked Individualism: Truth, Lies and Human Flesh

The increased pace and interconnectedness of the “information age” has led to the proliferation of “identity based movements,” what Manuel Castells (2010) refers to as “cultural communes,” social movements that rebel against the
dominant ideologies and institutions of global flows, and instead seek to construct alternative utopias. In exploring a range of these social movements across the globe, Castells found that they can be both progressive and regressive in nature. Here his analysis makes a critical departure from the vast majority of the literature on the Chinese internet, which tends to focus on more progressive case studies of online activism. Taken as a whole, these new social movements tend to undermine social cohesion, leading an otherwise optimistic Castells to once conclude: “A society made up of the juxtaposition of flows and tribes ceases to be a society. The structural logic of the information age bears the seeds of a new, fundamental barbarianism” (Castells 1999, 60). The internet, and the “networked individualism” it produces, intensifies this sense of dislocation. The “narrowcasting” or “pointcasting” of tweets, hyperlinks, RSS-feeds, and iTV have replaced the old broadcasting paradigm of newspapers, free-to-air television and wireless radio, creating the sort of “me-centered networks” that Dave Healy calls “lifestyle enclaves” and Cass Sunstein the “Daily Me” (Healy 1997; Sunstein 2007).

As the impact of new media technologies on our lives thickens, some are starting to question whether the internet actually broadens our intellectual horizons. In contrast, there is increasing evidence that it can actually narrow or warp our beliefs. Take, for example, the distorting effects of “informational cascades” within wired societies like the United States: today two-thirds of Americans believe that government officials had prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks; over 40 percent still think that federal officials were involved in the assassination of President Kennedy; and the percentage of Americans that believe President Obama is a socialist (40%), Muslim (32%), foreigner (25%), Hitler-like (20%), and the Anti-Christ (14%) are staggering (Stempell and Crowe 2007; Taylor 2010). False rumors and conspiracy theories alike are as old as human societies, but the speed, reach and filtering power of the internet has caused them to spread like wildfire throughout networked societies. We can now all find some shred of information to rationalize (or even manufacture) our own misguided suspicions or prior convictions (Thompson 2008; Pinaire 2005; Sunstein 2010). While the internet has dramatically increased our access to information, it also threatens to undermine the accuracy and meaning of much of this knowledge, as anyone with access to a computer and the internet can now become a “prosumer” in the freewheeling world of Web 2.0. Moreover, the conformity and polarization of close-knit blogging communities tends to entrench and even harden pre-existing beliefs (regardless of how extreme they might be), while also silencing alternative opinions.

This sort of “counterknowledge” is also rampant in China, and at times can resemble a digital form of Chinese whispers. As Zhu Ying notes, the Chinese internet is “highly vulnerable to manipulation and deceit” and “ripe with wilful ignorance, misinformation, and misguided faith in numbers and volume as proof of truth” (Zhu 2010). In the wake of the 2003 SARS epidemic, online
rumors suggested that the virus was a biological weapon invented by Taiwan and the United States to destroy China, while stores ran out of vinegar once it was suggested as the only antidote to the infection (Chiu 2003). More recent digital conspiracy theories have predicted the defection to the United States by Bank of China chief Zhou Xiaochuan (Rumours 2010); Goldman Sachs’ participation in a “bloodsucking” conspiracy to undermine China by destroying the global financial market (Epstein 2010); and a run on salt and iodine-rich products following a viral meme which suggested that “iodine prevents and even cures people from radiation damage” in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear crisis (Zhuang 2011). As Chinese law expert Stan Abrams (2010) points out, local arms of the Chinese government spend an increasing amount of their time trying to quash internet rumors, which in turn only serves to reinforce them.

China’s unique form of online vigilantism, the so-called human-flesh search engines (renrou sousuo yingqing 人肉搜索引擎), is a case in point. Directed at the right source, they can be a powerful form of digital activism, but all too often they result in petty, ill informed and harassing witch-hunts based on innuendos, half-truths and bizarre conspiracy theories. Take for example the online targeting, humiliation and eventual real world detention of a 21-year-old woman who flippantly claimed that the Sichuan earthquake was interfering with her television viewing habits, or the 31-year-old Hebei women who lost her job and received death threats after a jealous ex-boyfriend created a weblog in her name, claiming she was an AIDS-infected prostitute who enjoyed unprotected sex with over 200 clients (Downey 2010; Fletcher 2008; He 2010). Without appropriate privacy laws, argues Fudan University sociologist Yu Hai, these cyber-carnivores can resemble online lynch mobs: “Everyone makes their own ethical evaluations, but we cannot have everyone acting as their own policeman” (Wang 2008). The information age not only fosters misinformation, it also enhances surveillance capacities, making it easier to harm, libel, torment and even destroy our fellow citizens with a “digital scarlet letter” (Solove 2008; Sunstein 2010). “Bickering is the way of the Web in China,” writes People’s University professor Zhang Ming (2010). “There are no rules of conduct, no preconditions or demands for logic and consistency. If you can bowl your opponent over with insults you win. This atmosphere of unreason is so all-consuming that even those who take pride in being reasonable are dragged down into the mud.”

Given the freewheeling nature of China’s digital culture, it is not surprising that a 2007 survey found that “people’s faith in the reliability of internet content has been decreasing” (Guo 2007, 10). Those who thought the internet was reliable decreased from 52 percent to 26 percent between 2003 and 2007, while those who thought it was unreliable more than doubled, from 9 percent to 22 percent. Three-quarters of those surveyed thought information on government websites was reliable, compared with only 11% on BBS forums (Guo 2007, 9–11). A 2009 survey of bloggers found that nearly half thought either most or
some of the information on blogs was untrustworthy. And they thought this problem would only improve when the quality of bloggers improved (61%), new technologies were developed to authenticate blogger identities and information (51%), or the government implemented harsher penalties for offenders (49%) (CNNIC 2009, 40, 43). As one Chinese blogger recently stated: “On the internet, even [when] you provide facts about yourself, people won’t believe it. They think that you make them up. So it doesn’t matter whether you provide real or fake information because nobody trusts the information on the internet” (Cited in Liu 2010, 210).

Cast in this light, its easy to understand why nearly 84 percent of respondents thought that content on the internet should be controlled, with 83 percent identifying violence, 65 percent malicious speculation, and nearly 30 percent online chatting as in need of control, and 85 percent looked to the government to censor this content (Guo 2007, 10–15). Among bloggers, 65 percent either agreed with proposed legislation to require real-name registration or thought it wouldn’t have any impact on their blogging, while only 13 percent opposed it (CNNIC 2009, 45). The increasing uncivil nature of the Chinese internet might be one of the factors involved in the over 50 percent decline in those who think that the internet empowers the people (Guo 2007, 86).

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo declared in 2006: “The internet is God’s great gift to China—it has provided the Chinese people with the best tool in their efforts to cast off slavery and fight for freedom,” making it easier and more efficient to mobilize political opposition (Liu 2006). Like many young Chinese who came of age with the internet, Jin Liwen (2007) also had great hopes for the web and in particular its interactive BBS and blog forums. But by the time she arrived at MIT to undertake a Masters in Comparative Media Studies, her belief in “a virtual form of the Habermasian public sphere” began to unravel. Unlike the aggregating knowledge central to James Surowiecki’s The Wisdom of Crowds (2004) or Howard Rheingold’s Smart Mobs (2003), the Chinese internet forums she was studying often resembled online version of Gustave Le Bon’s unruly “popular mind”:

The masses live by, and are ruled by, subconscious and emotional thought process. The crowd has never thirsted for the truth. It turns aside from evidence that is not to its taste, preferring to glorify and to follow error, if the way of error appears attractive enough, and seduces them. Whoever can supply the crowd with attractive emotional illusions may easily become their master; and whoever attempts to destroy such firmly entrenched illusions of the crowd is almost sure to be rejected (Jin 2008, 99).

This is what leading technologist Jaron Lanier (2006) calls “digital Maoism,” the propensity of online collectivism to wreak havoc: “History has shown us again and again that a hive mind is a cruel idiot when it runs on autopilot.”
Anglophone commentary on the Chinese internet overwhelmingly profiles its professional, liberal-orientated blogging community, what Yang terms “a new type of entrepreneur-activist” (Yang 2009, 112). These are either those bilingual, bicultural “bridge bloggers” like Kaiser Kuo, Xiao Qiang and Zhao Jing (aka Michael Anti) or those writing purely in Chinese like poster-boy Han Han or citizen journalist Zhou Shuguan (aka Zola). Less attention has been paid to either the largely amateur blogging community, or its more conservative and reactionary elements. My own digital ethnography over the last three years has taken me deep inside one of the small corners of the Chinese internet—a rather dark, sobering periphery inhabited by an increasingly truculent community of Han supremacists (Leibold 2010a; Leibold 2010b). And these Han cyber-nationalists, I would suggest, are only one of a myriad of highly specialized and fragmented speech communities that comprise the “long tail” of the Sinophone internet (cf. Anderson 2006). Popular online forums like Baidu Tieba, Mop, and Tianya—with their millions of topic-based forums—can function simultaneously as a self-aggregating “hive mind” and “cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance” (Lanier 2006; Lawrence et al. 2010, 152). It depends on where one looks.

The anonymity of BBS postings certainly encourages an interest-based pack-mentality. In a country like China, where sharply worded opinions can garner official rebuke (if not lengthy prison sentences), there is a degree of safety in group-speak. As Esarey and Xiao (2008, 756) point out: “If many birds are flying, as it were, they are less likely to be targeted by the regime for repression.” This anonymity encourages the discussion of sensitive topics, but also invites flaming, trolling, hacking and the sort of trash-talk and uncivil behaviour—what the Chinese have termed “internet verbal violence” (wangluo yuyan baoli 网络语言暴力)—that one would never contemplate in face-to-face communication. Jin Liwen (2007) suggests that the irrational swarming and dichotomizing nature of internet controversies in China reflect a unique online reaction against the more conservative social norms of Chinese society. Yet others have turned to research by behavior and cognitive scientists for answers that transcend cultural boundaries and stereotypes.

In fact, there is increasing empirical evidence that internet users around the world are seeking out information and people who share their own narrow passions and convictions, the sort of “selective exposure” that social psychologists have long argued underpins homophily in social spaces ranging from friendships, neighborhoods, and playgrounds (Zuckerman 2008; McPherson et al. 2001). Carefully planned deliberative workshops, like the one political scientist He Baogang (2010) recently organized on the emotionally charged Tibet issue, might improve knowledge, understanding and mutual trust, but the scale and fluidity of cyberspace tends to engender homogeneous, interest-based commu-nities where genuine debate is a rare commodity. Here weblogs operate as one of the “disorderly media” identified by Kevin Latham (2007), a sort of
individualized, ephemeral, and lifestyle-based pool of infotainment that increasingly consumes all our lives but is also decoupling the citizen from any single source of media. In the case of China, this act of cyber-dislocation undermines many of the overly simplistic assumptions (hopes) we have about freedom eventually triumphing over oppression, calling into question the gradual evolution of a Habermasian “public sphere” in China, if not elsewhere. As Habermas (2006, 423) himself recently admitted, the informal and horizontal flows of computer-mediated communication undercuts the public sphere in liberal societies, fragmenting debate and creating a “huge number of isolated issue publics.”

Perhaps the greatest power of the internet, and its search engines like Baidu and Google in particular, is not the ability to locate information but rather filter it. The increasingly personalized nature of internet speech and information presents a number of inherent problems, according to Cass Sunstein (2006; 2007; 2009). First, it increases the ability of diverse yet segmented discourse communities to talk and listen to one another rather than engage in genuine dialogue; second, this process of balkanization also polarizes online opinion, leading to more extreme opinions which can foster hatred and even real world violence; and third, enclave deliberation often produces cyber-cascades, allowing rumors, conspiracy theories and false information to spread like wildfire on the internet; and finally, cyber-niches undermine “general-interest intermediaries,” like newspapers and the nightly news, making shared deliberation and consensus building more difficult.

For Sunstein, the blogosphere is particularly susceptible to information cocooning—the ease with which individuals can create their own fragmented speech markets and interest-based communities encourages misinformation, group polarization, and extremist thoughts and actions. In one of the first large-scale, empirical studies of political beliefs, activism and deliberation in the American blogosphere, a team of researchers found that “about 94 percent of political blog readers consume only blogs from one side of the ideological spectrum,” and were more polarized in their opinions than those who did not blog and consumed mainly TV news (Lawrence et al. 2010). Other smaller studies demonstrate a similar level of homophily among leading political bloggers in America, particularly when it comes to the sites they read and link to (Hargittai et al. 2008; Adamic and Glance 2005). While it is unclear whether homogenous groups lead to further polarization or whether polarized individuals self-select into homogeneous networks, the end result is the same: “discourse on blogs,” the authors conclude, “falls well short of the deliberative ideal” (Lawrence et al. 2010, 144).

This is particularly worrying for China given the extreme popularity of interactive, asynchronous weblogs, and their ability to “permit those with a sense of kinship or affinity to build their own ‘online corners’, and also allow popular mass discussion verging on real-time” (Hu 2010). Unlike comprehensive portals, these more specialized, interest-based forums, like the Han nationalist websites I have been studying—or those dedicated to religious cults, online gaming or other narrow pursuits (cf. Thornton 2010; Dunn 2007; Nakamura
—can function like a “gated community,” where a rigid hierarchy of administrators, moderators, and top-ranked members dissuade contrary opinions and the sharing of new information or practices that challenge the community’s discursive and ideological norms. This “cyber-sectarianism” can lead to charges of heresy and internal schisms that fragment the community even further; but also enclave epistemologies that cascade throughout society, creating alternative realities that challenge mainstream opinion. Given the numerous divisions that already permeate Chinese society, these cyber-ghettos have the potential to undermine social stability and national integration in the PRC, and thus need to be considered alongside more progressive forms of digital activism.

In sum, there is still a great deal we don’t understand about the internet. Yet mainstream analysis in the West continues to stress its revolutionary potential in China. Even the speed and brutality with which the party-state crushed China’s stillborn “Jasmine Revolution” hasn’t dampened this enthusiasm. Admitting that “sudden, radical change” is unlikely in China, Guobin Yang (2011) still sees no reason for despair. Thanks to the internet and its “gradual revolution,” he remains confident that “change has been under way in China for years, but in forms more subtle than most people outside the country understand.” But what sort of subtle changes are these? Is the internet altering China in ways that are radically different from the West and elsewhere in the world? If new communication technologies can have countervailing effects on political participation in Western democracies, isn’t it a bit premature, if not naïve, to posit that the internet is gradually subverting party-state hegemony or promoting a new kind of deliberative public sphere in China? A perverse kind of “digital Orientalism,” Evgeny Morozov (2010, 241–44) warns, prevents us in the West from asking the same sort of difficult questions about the internet’s impact in China that we have long asked ourselves. If Google is making Americans stupid (Haigh 2006; Carr 2008), why not Baidu and China? The internet has certainly created new spaces for individual self-expression and interest-group mobilization. But more empirical, comparative, and cross-disciplinary research is required to determine whether Chinese netizens are employing these new platforms in fundamentally different ways from their global counterparts, and the precise implications of these changes. Might the passage of time reveal that the digital activism required to ignite a prairie fire of revolutionary, democratic change in China is being snuffed out by the dull flicker and gentle tapping of millions of isolated, individual computers and their smiley-faced bloggers?

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