

The Echo among the Walls

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Preface

In 1996, John Perry Barlow publicised the prominent “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”^[1] discussing whether governments should show intrusion in the virtual world. In it, Barlow claimed: “We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.” But I’m not discussing the morals and ethics here. Yet.

Internet censorship has always been the centre of debates. I believe the initial intention was never to cause harm in any form, just as I believe technology was innovated to benefit human kinds. However, the rapid evolution of censorship, as well as the seemingly more and more complex political campaigns, is a clear fact and in numerous cases, we are all witnesses of its backfire and even exploitation of rights. In the following, I will be elaborating how Internet censorship, as probably the most essential platform of speech in this era, not only builds but encourages echo chamber and accordingly goes beyond geographic borders and remaps the world (or Taiwan as an independent country in this case.)

Citizens’ Rights

Since I’m going to narrate about how governmental encroachment on the Internet might affect users as citizens, I listed some specific statements from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights^[2] published by the UN in 1948 and the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China^[3] issued in 1954, in relation to the topic of “the access of information and the liberty of speaking about them”.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

- Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; 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.

Constitution of the People’s Republic China, 1982

- Article 35: Citizens of the People’s Republic of China have the freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession, and of demonstration. (中華人民共和國公民有言論、出版、集會、結社、遊行、示威的自由。)
- Article 40: The freedom and privacy of correspondence of citizens of the People’s Republic of China are protected by law. No organisation or individual may, on any ground, infringe upon citizens’ freedom and privacy of correspondence, except in cases where, to meet the needs of

State security or of criminal investigation, public security or procuratorial organs are permitted to examine correspondence in accordance with the procedures prescribed by law. (中華人民共和國公民的通信自由和通信秘密受法律的保護。除因國家安全或者追查刑事犯罪的需要，由公安機關或者檢察機關依照法律規定的程序對通信進行檢查外，任何組織或者個人不得以任何理由侵犯公民的通信自由和通信秘密。)

What is Internet Censorship?

To put in a nutshell, internet censorship is the restriction and suppression of what can be accessed, published, or viewed on the Internet filtered by regulations. As detrimental as it sounds, internet censorship includes the use of copyrights, defamation, harassment, etc. However, I want to zoom in on national-scale of domestic Internet censorship which is much less naive.

Government agencies in some countries filter content that is not in favour of the regime such as violation of religious values and public morals. You might wonder “but what are ‘religious values’ and ‘public morals’?” and that is where the controversy lies on. By using vague languages, the government has a blurred grey area to determine what is allowed and what should be banned.

How Does It Work?

According to OpenNet Initiative^[4], there are a few strategies of practising Internet censorship.

Technical Blocking

Technical site blocking, as the name suggested, means blocking access to specific webpages, domains, or IP addresses using techniques of IP blocking (the configuration used on Internet servers to block connections from a specific IP address), DNS tampering (the practice of preventing servers from returning the actual website requested by the user), URL blocking (the process of denying the access to certain websites or certain URL addresses for the users) through proxy.

Search Results Removals

Some search engine companies cooperate with governments to omit specific websites from search results. Rather than banning the targeted websites, this strategy simply makes them hard to be found by using the impatience embedded in us as we are the generation that is not exactly known for patience.

The Take-Down

Simple as the name is. In areas where regulators have direct access to legal jurisdiction over web content hosts, this strategy is demanding the removal of the websites.

Self-Censorship

In my opinion, this is the most effective yet terrifying tactic of all. This strategy usually occurs outside the Internet world through methods of legal (or even illegal) actions, promotions of social norms, or formal approaches of intimidation such as arrest and detention. In most cases, the “sensitive” contents are not stated formally. The perception of governmental involvement in Internet surveillance and monitoring is enough for users themselves to avoid posting materials, leaving comments, or visiting websites that might draw the attention of the authorities.

The most candid and brutal consequence of Internet censorship is the direct violation of the fundamental citizens’ right to freedom of speech. It not only limits the access to information (with and without the awareness of users) but unashamedly contravenes one of the basic human rights universally recognised.

The Great Firewall

After a couple of years of the arrival of the Internet in China in 1994, the Chinese government started to realise that the massive flow of information has the potential to create an irreversible political wave and that is why it decided to take actions on it, hence the Great Firewall.^[5]

The Great Firewall, to explain it briefly, is the combination of legislative actions and technologies enforced by the Chinese government to regulate the Internet in China, in other words, a censorship system (and considered to be the most advanced one in the world.) Because China is regarded as the country that performs Internet censorship at its fullest potential, the Great Firewall was described as “a ‘panopticon’ that encourages self-censorship through the perception that users are being watched (and at the same time watching others),” which pretty much sums up the scale of control over Internet contents inside the walls.

What Impact Does it Have?

Nonetheless, it is no secret that there are methods to leap over the Great Firewall (until it was officially illegalised in 2015),^[6] and the most common one is VPN. VPN (Virtual Private Network) allows users to bypass geographic restrictions^[7] and is mainly used by non-Chinese speakers living in China as Google has been banned since 2010 and Baidu, the biggest Chinese search engine, generally delivers results in Chinese exclusively. But of course, it also provides a window to the outside world for those behind the Great Firewall. The question is, why the Chinese government is aware of this window but didn’t seem to be actively plugging the hole on the wall?

We often assume Chinese don’t have the freedom of speech, whereas they, as a matter of fact, are granted to discuss anything as long as it’s not against the Chinese Communist Party. Diving into it deeper, in many cases, the government doesn’t actually put everyone who publicly criticises the government behind bars.^[8] The reason is straightforward and indeed sophisticated from the perspective of the Chinese government: to create fear among the citizens themselves and consequently concrete and strengthen self-censorship. After all, the most powerful intimidation is not throwing everyone into jail but to build up this unsettling phenomenon that automatically silences all. As a result, within the Great Firewall, there’s a solid echo chamber

that often thrives single stories, for example, the position of Taiwan is interpreted/twisted into the solo Chinese perspective despite the uncertain reality.

The Single Story of Taiwan's Position

It is nearly impossible to conclude precisely how the Chinese internet users perceive Taiwan along with the pattern of thinking to that conclusion. Regardless, the common understanding in China is that Taiwan belongs to China while most Taiwanese would strongly disagree. What is frightening is that any voice that slightly supports that latter statement would be removed from the Internet in China. Moreover, the same statement posted on platforms that are banned in China such as Facebook and Tweeter would be fiercely condemned or even attacked by the Chinese users who overpass the Great Firewall (and perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Chinese government turns a blind eye to VPN services.) Therefore, within the Wall, "Taiwan is part of China" is an undoubtedly and solo reality in spite of the fact that Taiwan completes the checklist of a sovereign state, which are population, territory, government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other sovereign states.

Censored Words in Relation to Borders in China^[9]

China doesn't clearly state which words are not allowed so it might not be accurate but this is the list of "the collective effort" of the Chinese Internet users.

- Taiwan Independence Movement (台灣獨立運動)
- Democratic Progressive Party, DPP (民主進步黨, a central-left party in Taiwan that advocates pro-independence policies)
- Taiwan Independence Association (台灣獨立會)
- Two Chinas (兩個中國, referring to the current geopolitical situation of People's Republic of China and Republic of China, commonly known as Taiwan)
- One Country on Each Side (一邊一國, the concept that emphasises the 2 separated political entities of China and Taiwan)
- One China, One Taiwan (一中一台)
- Double Tenth Day (雙十節, the national day of Taiwan)
- Tsay Ing-Wen (蔡英文, current president of Taiwan)
- Lee Teng-Hui (李登輝, former president of Taiwan)
- Chen Shui-Bian (陳水扁, former president of Taiwan)
- Lu Hsiu-Lien (呂秀蓮, former vice president of Taiwan and advocator of Taiwan independence)
- Hsieh Chang-Ting (謝長廷, cofounder of DPP)
- Cary S. Hung (洪哲勝, advocator of Taiwan independence and Chinese democracy)
- Hong Kong Independence (香港獨立)
- British Hong Kong (英屬香港, 1841- 1997)

- Inner Mongolia Protest (內蒙古抗議, in relation to the Inner Mongolia Independence Movement)
- Xinjiang/Uyghur Independence Movement (新疆獨立運動)
- World Uyghur Congress (世界維吾爾代表大會, opposes what is considered to be Chinese occupation of East Turkestan)
- Rebiya Kadeer (熱比雅·卡爾德, former president of World Uyghur Congress)
- Tibetan Independence Movement (西藏獨立運動)
- Tibetan Government-in-Exile (西藏流亡政府)
- Central Tibetan Administration, CTA (藏人行政中央)
- Dalai Lama (達賴喇嘛, founder of CTA)
- Szechuan Independence (四川獨立)

Conclusion

At the beginning of the Internet, the cyberspace was relatively simple and innocent. But it has been 20 years since the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace was published, and the cyberspace is no longer neutral and naive as it might once be. It has its flaws and imperfections that assuredly requires destined regulations at some certain extend, yet that extend should not be a wall.

I'm not saying that the censorship in China is the ultimate villain and it's bound and determined to be demolished. The GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon) are no saints either; nonetheless, in terms of access of information, they do approve the existent of different voices which also hands in the opportunity of breaking the echo chamber to the users/citizens simultaneously. Take Taiwan as an example, if users within the wall (as I see them be the ones with more responsibility due to their undeniable large population) listen to divergent opinions, will the situation be different? Will there be more chance of constructive communication? Will there be mutual understanding?

References

- [1]John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", 1996
- [2]The United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", 1948
- [3]"Constitution of the People's Republic of China",1954
- [4]OpenNet Initiative
- [5]Xinmei Shen, The story of China's Great Firewall, the world's most sophisticated censorship system, 2019
- [6]BBC News, China blocks virtual private network use, 2015
- [7]Chris, Hoffman, What Is a VPN, and Why Would I Need One? 2019
- [8]蒂瑪小姐咖啡館, 為什麼中共「默許中國人翻牆」? 解密中共言論控制最高手段
- [9]China Digital Times中國數字時代