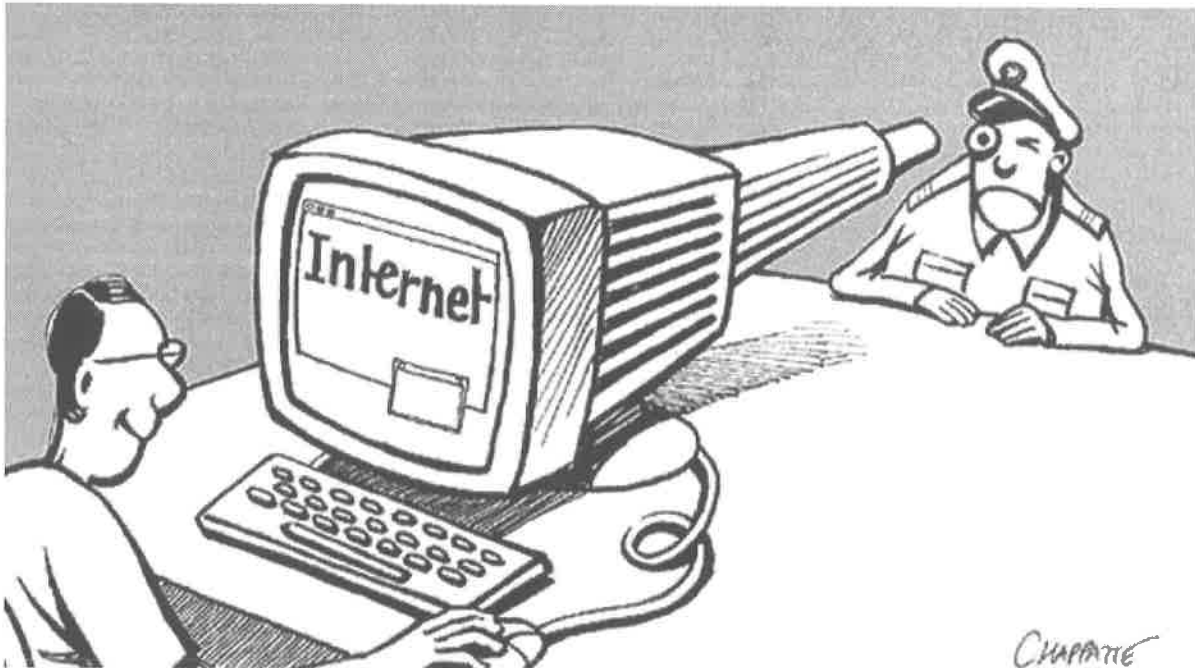


Internet censorship and “information control” in China

by Benjamin Knoll | Oct 3, 2017 | Featured, Politics | 0 comments



I recently had the opportunity to attend the 5th annual Mexican Political Science Association conference where Dr. Gary King presented his recent research on what he calls “information control” by the Chinese government. Dr. King is one of the country’s foremost political scientists and is engaged in some fascinating cutting-edge research. He explained that in contrast to the United States and other democracies that permit a great deal of individual freedom for citizens to say, write, and publish what they like without fear of government punishment or censorship, the Chinese government (similar to other authoritarian systems) regularly removes social media and blog posts written by its citizens. In their research, Dr. King and his colleagues have found two key patterns in this type of information control by Chinese authorities:

First, Chinese authorities do not generally censor day-to-day social media posts that are critical of the government. Instead, they censor social media activity that advocates collective action of some type. In other words, the Chinese government doesn’t regularly respond if someone says on the internet that the government is full of scoundrels, but if someone says “the government is full of scoundrels so let’s meet up next Saturday to do a public demonstration in favor of clean government” the Chinese internet monitors will quickly remove the social media post. He concludes that the Chinese government doesn’t really care what its citizens think about them,

they just care whether its citizens can influence popular support to take action against the regime.

Second, the Chinese government doesn't spend much time counter-arguing with citizens who post critical information about the government. Instead, they engage in "giant bursts of cheerleading-type distractions." Their employees will flood the Chinese internet with thousands of what he called "fluff" social media content that talk about how great the Chinese government is and how lucky they all are to be Chinese citizens and how wonderful everything is. In his view, this shows that the Chinese government doesn't think that it can "win the battle of ideas" by counter-arguing with its citizens, so instead they try to distract their citizens by drowning out the criticism with pro-government propaganda.

It was a fascinating research presentation. More information on Dr. King's research on this topic can be found [here](#) and [here](#). More on China's approach to freedom of speech and bloggers can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). In addition to this type of internet censorship and information control, it is also well-known that China has imprisoned bloggers who write information critical to the regime in power, especially when their content goes viral and has the potential to persuade others.

Questions to consider:

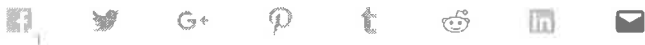
- What is the motivation of the Chinese government to engage in this kind of "information control"? What would they say that they are doing and why are they doing it? What assumptions do they have about their role in relation to the Chinese people? To them, what justifies the restriction on people's freedom of expression? How are these assumptions different from those of western democracies like the United States?
- From a western perspective, why is freedom of speech important? Why do liberal democracies protect the right of citizens to say critical things about their leaders and engage in peaceful protests against political regimes? In a liberal democracy, should authorities regularly monitor the speech and internet activity of citizens, checking for critical views about those in power? Why or why not?
- Philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that freedom of opinion, speech, and expression is essential to the "mental well-being of mankind" and to "the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" for the following reasons: 1) a silenced opinion might in the end be found to be true and to deny this is to presume infallibility on the part of the censor, 2) if the opinion is wrong, it probably contains at least some truth, and that partial truth will help uncover the full truth, 3) truths may not be believed by the people at large unless they're allowed to be subjected to critical inquiry and discussion, 4) the collision of contrasting ideas helps us better understand and defend our beliefs because we're better able to test them and consider them. What are the strengths of Mill's arguments? What are the weaknesses? What would Mill say about China's approach to social media activity on the part of its citizens?
- Which of the two approaches (Chinese "information control" or western freedom of speech, thought, and expression) is more conducive to human flourishing? Which is more likely to

produce an environment through which “truth will prevail”?

- Do these same principles and questions apply in non-political organizations? Should voluntary organizations such as places of employment, education, religion, or other community groups permit a wide range of freedom of opinion, speech, and expression on the part of their members? Why or why not?
- If you were to design basic operating principles for the authoritative body in any given social organization, which of the two approaches would you favor? Why?

Discuss.

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