

## New Social Media and (Electronic) Democratization in East and Southeast Asia Malaysia and China Compared

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### Abstract

This essay explores the impact of the Internet and new social media in China and Malaysia. In particular, it examines the extent to which the tools and platforms of new information communication technology have *democratizing effects* in two very different types of illiberal regime. Democratization here is defined not as a simple process of political liberalization but instead as a dynamic process through which democratic norms and practices are disseminated. Of particular concern is whether they contribute to (a) a democratization of information, (b) the creation and/or expansion of the public sphere, and (c) expanded participation and mobilization. Although we find that evidence for democratization in Malaysia is greater than in China, in both cases, the overall impact of the Internet and new social media has been relatively limited. Moreover, in both cases, the development of the Internet, its evolution, and its societal impact are contextual. Successful strategies in one context are not likely to be easily mapped onto other countries with different experiences of Internet development.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Internet, new social media, Malaysia, China, mobilization.

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**F**or over a decade, the potential democratizing effects of the Internet have been analyzed, debated, discussed, and hyped. Proponents of the transformative impact of new information communications technologies have argued that specific and unique features of the Internet and its associated applications

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present challenges to information management and regulation in both authoritarian and liberal regimes. Skeptics<sup>1</sup> typically view the Internet as “just another broadcast medium,”<sup>2</sup> highlighting the more banal and insidious uses of the Internet. What has changed in the past few years, however, is that the latest iteration of the Internet, often dubbed Web 2.0, has seen the proliferation of software that has made the Internet much more dynamic and interactive. Principal among these new developments has been the rapid growth of social networking, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and blogging. The net result of this is that “[t]he Web is no longer about idly surfing and passively reading, listening, or watching. It’s about peering: sharing, socializing, collaborating, and, most of all, creating within loosely connected communities.”<sup>3</sup> This debate over the impact of the Internet drew renewed attention following the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world. From Tunis to Cairo, and Tripoli to Damascus, protest movements against authoritarian rule openly utilized social networking and file-sharing tools to publicize and organize demonstrations and to catalogue human rights abuses. The Arab Spring, or Jasmine Revolution, as the events were dubbed, was an event that was both witnessed and played out in real time online. While none of these applications was designed to facilitate social and political mobilization, “savvy opposition campaigners [have] turned social media applications like Facebook from minor pop culture fads into a major tool of political communication.”<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the failure of the Jasmine Revolution to take off, online or otherwise, in other, non-Arab, authoritarian regimes suggests that the democratizing potential of social media and other Internet tools is likely conditional on the contexts of individual nations.

While cross-country analyses of political social media use are still relatively rare, data from a number of single-country case studies suggests that Internet users are more politically active than non-Internet users and that users of social media applications are even more politically engaged.<sup>5</sup> Skeptics argue that these studies overstate the impact of the Internet and new social media. Dismissing online activism as “slacktivism,” Gladwell<sup>6</sup> argues, for

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” *New Yorker* (October 4, 2010), [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell#ixzz1mloj2GPI](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell#ixzz1mloj2GPI) (accessed July 25, 2012), and Morozov Evgeny, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Gong, “Internet Politics and State Media Control: Candidate Weblogs in Malaysia,” *Sociological Perspectives* 54, no. 3 (2011): 311.

<sup>3</sup> Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2010), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Hampton, Lauren Sessions Goulet, Lee Raine, and Kristen Purcell, “Social Networking and Our Lives: Pew Internet and American Life Project” (2011), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx> (accessed June 16, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Gladwell, “Small Change.”

example, that social media produces weak ties between “concerned” users that are no substitute for the strong ties that are required for real-world struggle, demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins. While there may be some merits in Gladwell’s critique, by setting up a simple dichotomy between real-world and online activism, he constructs a straw man. The significance of online activism is not that it replaces real-world activism but that it can become “the supporting infrastructure of social movements.”<sup>7</sup> As examples from Burma, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Tunisia demonstrate, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are increasingly playing a role in assisting the coordination of demonstrations and enabling activists to share footage with the global media.

The development of blogs and other methods of sharing information online, along with the proliferation of compact digital cameras, now means that today’s citizens have tools at their disposal similar to those of a professional journalist. Consequently, people on the scene of an event, a demonstration, a protest, or a disaster are able to share their images and stories with a global audience. This phenomenon, called “Citizen Journalism,” is challenging the agenda-setting role of journalists and editors as never before and undermining their role as gatekeepers of information.<sup>8</sup> In countries where editors and journalists have censored their own output for fear of invoking the ire and wrath of government ministers, this gate-keeping role has been an important feature of media control. Editors can still spout propaganda, spin a story, or, indeed, kill it. But, audiences in both liberal and authoritarian regimes are now less passive and can fact-check what is reported, discern omissions and contractions, and report stories that go unreported in the traditional media. Censorship faces an ecosystem of a billion editorials.<sup>9</sup>

Authoritarian regimes, however, are not blind to the challenge that these new technologies present. They have reacted by blocking content, monitoring online forums, and paying trustworthy netizens to contest and bury oppositional narratives. In autocracies that have not experienced their own Arab Spring, the question then becomes: To what extent has the Internet allowed the expansion of counter-narratives and regime-threatening dialog? Democratization, in these terms, is not simply a process of political and regime transformation to a liberal/electoral democracy. Instead, we define it as a dynamic process through which democratic norms, institutions, and practices are disseminated. In this context, we identify three specific ways in which the Internet contributes to such processes: first, via the *democratization of information*, a process that undermines the power of government or established media organizations to

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<sup>7</sup> Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen, *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: New York Press, 2008).

control content; second, through a process by which the aggregation of public opinion challenges and levels existing hierarchies, resulting in the emergence of a public sphere, in which citizens can exchange views on matters of importance; and third, via a process by which social media are utilized to *expand participation* and *facilitate mobilization*, both online and in the real world.

In order to explore whether both the Internet and new social media are democratizing, this essay selects two very different test cases: Malaysia and China. These cases are chosen in order to explore two very different institutional histories. While both regimes are at different points on the authoritarian-democratic continuum, neither regime scores highly on civil and political-liberty scales. Although Malaysia holds frequent and regular elections that are contested by multiple parties, these elections are far from free and fair, resulting in effective one-party rule.<sup>10</sup> The People’s Republic of China almost completely<sup>11</sup> eschews popular elections in favor of socialist democracy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, by exploring these cases, we are investigating how the Internet affects two different types of illiberal regimes, one often designated as either semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian, the other, highly autocratic and authoritarian.

Our results tentatively suggest that the conditions of media control and censorship before the popularization of the Internet have had a significant impact on how much the Internet has spurred democratization. Malaysia

Table 1. Freedom House Rankings

Country	Civil Liberties 1-7	Political Rights 1-7	Press Freedom 1-100	Internet Freedom 1-100
Malaysia	4	4	64	43
China	6	7	83	85

(1=most free)

Source: Data taken from Freedom in the World, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom on the Net reports, 2012 and 2013. Freedom House (2012/2013), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/reports> (accessed August 19, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Since independence in 1957, the United Malays National Organization has ruled Malaysia in a governing coalition in which it has remained the dominant and leading constituent party.

<sup>11</sup> Some extremely limited elections occur in China at the local level. See Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, “Why Do People Vote in Semicompetitive Elections in China?” *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2002): 178-197; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Accommodating ‘Democracy’ in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China,” *China Quarterly* (2000): 465-489; and Tianjian Shi, “Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 3 (April 1, 1999): 385-412.

<sup>12</sup> *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*, 1982, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> (last accessed December 4, 2013).

traditionally had used legal means to monitor and manage the media, whereas in China the media had been under direct state control. In the case of Malaysia, political entrepreneurs have been able to use the Internet to bypass legal restrictions, which were not crafted with the peer-to-peer nature of the Internet in mind. The Chinese authorities, for several reasons, have been more attuned to the mobilization potential of the Internet, and the legacy of state control of the communication infrastructure has allowed them to more effectively curb expression online. Overall, while it is fair to say that the Internet has played a democratizing role in both countries, local conditions in each area of democratization have shaped the degree to which this has occurred. We therefore suggest that democratization should not be conceptualized as a monolithic, universal process, but rather as a multipart, multistep, contingent experience.

### **The Internet and Democratization in Malaysia**

Much has been written about the impact of the Internet in Malaysia,<sup>13</sup> largely because it provides a unique case of a regime that, despite restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of expression, chose a policy of noncensorship of the Internet in order to enhance the country's economic competitiveness and attract foreign investment into the information communications sector. The result of this was the emergence of a vibrant, parallel, online public sphere alongside a largely circumscribed real-world civil society. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting public spheres provides us with an ideal environment in which to analyze just how much impact those features of the Internet depicted as democratic and democracy-enabling can have, when left largely unfettered, on regimes in which, despite frequent and regular elections, civil liberties and democratic freedoms are proscribed. In short, the answer is that, due to the environment in which the Internet developed in Malaysia, these new technologies dramatically have altered netizen's ability to retrieve new types of information, engage each other, and mobilize against the regime.

### **The Context of the Internet in Malaysia**

Among the principal characteristics of Malaysia's hybrid semi-authoritarian regime is a compliant traditional media that, while largely under private

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Jason Abbott, "Democracy@Internet.org Revisited: Analysing the Socio-Political Impact of the Internet and New Social Media in East Asia," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2012): 333-357; Gong, "Internet Politics and State Media Control"; Cherian George, *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); and Ross Tapsell, "The Media Freedom Movement in Malaysia: Backlash and Retaliation of an Electoral Authoritarian Regime," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 613-635.

ownership, nevertheless displays a clear and consistent progovernment bias.<sup>14</sup> This bias is achieved through a combination of legislative mechanisms as well as complex ownership structures that tie most of the main media corporations into webs of personal and party patronage networks. In addition, the threat of the use of such laws against editors and journalists has proven an effective mechanism for ensuring self-censorship and restraint.<sup>15</sup>

Since independence in 1957, the principal legislative checks on freedom of the press and freedom of expression have been amendments to the Federal Constitution, the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Official Secrets Act, the Sedition Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA). Of all of the means by which the government has been able to silence critical voices, the ISA attracted the most opprobrium. Originally passed in 1960 at the end of the communist-led insurgency (1948–1960), section 8(1) of the act allowed police to arrest without warrant any person suspected of acting in “any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia ... or the economic life thereof” and to detain the individual for up to sixty days without trial and thereafter for “further periods” with the approval of the Minister of Home Affairs, thus permitting indefinite detention without trial. In 2012, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA) was passed, effectively repealing the ISA. Although SOSMA removes the most odious parts of the ISA, the new legislation still effectively allows for indefinite detention by filing appeals, while the Sedition Act has been more liberally used since the abolition of the ISA to suppress dissent. Moreover, the new act contains overly broad and vague language, defining a security offense as simply “an act prejudicial to national security and public safety” and as “activity detrimental to parliamentary democracy.” Conveniently, nowhere is “detrimental” defined in the act.

Although originally intended to check internal subversion, the ISA was used against leaders of opposition parties and civil-society groups, including most famously the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998. It also was used against journalists and bloggers, including in 2001, Hishamuddin Rais, then a columnist for the online news service *Malaysiakini*, and, in 2008, against the country’s most famous blogger, Raja Petra Kamaruddin. Furthermore, although now repealed, the government retains other legislative measures to detain critical voices.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jason Abbott, “Electoral Authoritarianism and the Print Media in Malaysia: Measuring Political Bias and Analyzing Its Cause,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 38, no.1 (2011): 1-38.

<sup>15</sup> Tapsell, “The Media Freedom Movement in Malaysia.”

<sup>16</sup> In July 2012, for example, the blogger Syed Abdullah Hussein Al-Attas was arrested under the Official Secrets Act (1972). See Reporters Without Borders, “Blogger Held Under Draconian Official Secrets Act” (July 5, 2012), <http://en.rsf.org/malaisie-blogger-held-under-draconian-05-07-2012,42967.html> (accessed August 15, 2012). Similarly, in July 2013, notorious “sex” bloggers, Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee, were imprisoned under the Sedition Act for posting a photo on their Facebook page during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, deemed insulting to Islam. See Yasmin Hafiz, “Alvin and Vivian Jailed: Malaysian Sex Bloggers Charged with Sedition for

While the ISA may be the more infamous legislative check on freedom of speech and expression, the most explicit form of legislative control of press freedom is the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act, which, until 2012, required *all* print publications to apply for an *annual* permit from the Home Ministry, which could be refused, revoked, or suspended at the minister's discretion, without judicial review. Additionally, Section 7 allows the government to ban the publication, circulation, or import of any books that it deems prejudicial to public order, morality, or security, while Section 8A(1) provides for a jail term or heavy fine for any editor, journalist, publisher, or individual who "maliciously print[s] false information."

The PPPA has been used on several occasions to ban or restrict the publication of newspapers published by opposition political parties—most notably in March 2000, when the Islamic party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), was forced to restrict the publication of its newspaper, *Harakah*, from biweekly to bimonthly. Additionally, critical magazines such as *Detik*, *Tamadun*, and *Wasilah* were all effectively banned<sup>17</sup> following the revocation of their licenses during the "Reformasi" protests of 1998 and 1999. Furthermore, the act also has been used against mainstream newspapers. During a period of high racial tensions in 1987, "two national dailies, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and a Malay bi-weekly, *Watan*, had their licenses revoked."<sup>18</sup>

In April 2012, the Malaysian government introduced amendments to the PPPA that removed the requirement to renew permits annually. It also removed the prohibition on judicial review of any decision by the Home Minister to refuse, revoke, or suspend a permit, as well as allowed the publication (or relevant person) the opportunity to be heard before a decision to revoke or suspend is made. While this represents some progress, the grounds for a suspension or revocation remain largely unchanged. In addition, the section of the act that allows the public prosecutor to jail media practitioners for spreading "false news" for a maximum of three years was unchanged.

In stark contrast to the strict control of the print media, and the compliance of the TV media, the Internet in Malaysia has remained surprisingly free. This was not, however, the result of any enlightened political decision by the Malaysian government, but rather the result of economic policy and early ignorance of the socio-political consequences of that economic policy. One of the defining characteristics of the economic policy of the Mahathir administration was the championing of high-profile mega-projects as part of a broader goal of

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Inciting Religious Enmity with Ramadan Image," *Huffington Post* (July 18, 2013), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/18/alvin-and-vivian-jailed-malaysia-sex-bloggers\\_n\\_3616657.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/18/alvin-and-vivian-jailed-malaysia-sex-bloggers_n_3616657.html) (accessed September 10, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> International Commission of Jurists, "Malaysia: Attacks on Justice, 2002" (2002), <http://old.icj.org/IMG/pdf/malaysia.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Wang Lay Kim, "Media and Democracy in Malaysia," *The Public* 8, no. 2 (2001): 81.

transforming Malaysia into a developed economy by 2020.<sup>19</sup> Chief among these projects was the launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996. Now known as MSC Malaysia, the project aimed to turn Malaysia into a regional IT hub by offering generous tax incentives to foreign investors, coupled with huge government investment in high-speed broadband infrastructure in a purpose-built new town and science park, known as Cyberjaya. (Cyberjaya was constructed close to a the \$3.5 billion international airport, KLIA, which was opened in 1998).

In addition to the fiscal and infrastructure incentives, Mahathir also decided to give the MSC project an additional competitive advantage over neighboring Singapore by writing into the MSC Bill of Guarantees a pledge that there would be no censorship of material on the Internet. Indeed, when in 1998-1999 the government clumsily tried to force the owners of all cybercafés to register their users and provide information on users to police on demand, one of the original members of the International Advisory Board (IAP), futurologist Alvin Toffler, responded with a withering critique and an initial boycott of the IAP, stating in an interview with *Businessweek*, “[T]he essence of Silicon Valley is not the fiber-optic cables...it is the creative innovative drive, with large numbers of people racing to create new ideas...[t]hat’s hard to achieve in an atmosphere charged with political repression.”<sup>20</sup> In response to the wider international criticism that decision provoked, the administration reversed the order on March 16, 1999, in order to limit damage to investor confidence in the mega-project.

Although the administration discussed concerns about the availability of pornographic material and dissident voices on the Internet, the speed with which opposition groups took to the Internet, especially during the Reformasi protests in 1998, demonstrated, according to one veteran commentator at the time, that the government did not know how the medium worked, how it could be used to spread information, or how it provided tools to “overcome the official and government control of the mass media.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jason Abbott, “Mahathir, Malaysia and the Multimedia Super Corridor: Development Catalyst, White Elephant, or Cultural Landmark,” in *Public Policy, Culture and the Impact of Globalization in Malaysia*, ed. Mohd Hazim Shah and Phua Kai Lit (Kuala Lumpur: Vinlin Press, 2004), 40-58.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Einhorn and Sherri Prasso, “Dr. M’s High Tech Folly: The Silicon Valley of Asia Isn’t Dead, but It Is Badly Wounded,” *Businessweek Online* (March 21, 1999), <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/1999-03-21/mahathirs-high-tech-folly-intl-edition> (accessed March 15, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> M. G. G. Pillai, former journalist and Internet activist, interview by Jason Abbott, Kuala Lumpur, July 2001.

## The Internet as a Source of Information

Evidence abounds that the decision to reverse the order “opened” up a space in which previously prohibited news could be accessed. Among the most cited examples for this is the growth of the independent online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*. In November 1999, taking the government’s commitment not to censor the Web at its word, former *Star* journalist Steven Gan launched the country’s first commercial online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*. Widely regarded as one of the few credible independent voices in Malaysia, *Malaysiakini* is pro-opposition by default because it is one of the few news sources that is openly and explicitly critical of the government. As a result, *Malaysiakini* is now one of the top ten most visited Web sites in Malaysia, with the only other news site on the list being the progovernment English-language daily, *The Star*.<sup>22</sup> *Malaysiakini*’s importance as a source of independent information was best illustrated on the night of the 2008 general election. When it became clear that the opposition had performed better than anyone had expected, the mainstream media simply did not know what to do, or how to report this. Consequently, traffic to *Malaysiakini* surged. Overall, a million visitors flocked to the site on election night, helping to make *Malaysiakini* the fastest rising search term on Google.my in 2008.<sup>23</sup>

Another online news site that emerged prior to the 2008 elections was the *Nut Graph*. Founded by Jacqueline Surin, a journalist who also “defected” from the traditional media, the decision to create the *Nut Graph* (originally titled *MalaysiaVotes*) reflected Surin’s frustration with censorship. An award-winning columnist for the *Sun*, Surin recounts<sup>24</sup> how, during the first Bersih rally of 2007, her editor pleaded with her “not to write anything about Bersih, not to mention ‘yellow’<sup>25</sup>... how big the crowd was, and how the police had arrested people and dispersed marchers with chemical-laced water jets.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, she was asked to write about the weather.

Surin’s account of her decision to create an online news site demonstrates a number of features of the leveling hypothesis, which, in turn, lends credence to arguments for the democratization of information. Surin remarks that she

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<sup>22</sup> Coming in sixth place, the *Star* is arguably the most independent of all the progovernment newspapers. Nevertheless, its bias, particularly during the 2008 election, has been quantitatively demonstrated: Abbott, “*Electoral Authoritarianism and the Print Media in Malaysia*,” 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Google Zeitgeist (2008), <http://www.google.com/press/zeitgeist2008/> (accessed June 15, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Jacqueline Surin, “Occupying the Internet: Responding to the Shifting Power Balance,” *Round Table* 99, no. 407 (2010): 195-209.

<sup>25</sup> The color yellow was adopted by promonarchy demonstrators in Thailand during the unrest that followed the reelection of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2005. Malaysian demonstrators similarly adopted the color when they marched to present the country’s “elected” monarch with their petition for electoral reform.

<sup>26</sup> Surin, “Occupying the Internet,” 197.

was surprised at how easy it was to launch the site, noting that within a week she and three seasoned journalists were able to launch it. “What struck me was that I didn’t need much institutional support”; simply by “using our own hand phones, digital cameras, and writing skills we were able to put up our own newssite.”<sup>27</sup> The wider impact of the ability to start ventures such as this for Surin is that “power has shifted. Neither governments nor established media companies alone control content any more. Government propaganda now faces stiff competition from the counter-propaganda of artists, opposition political parties and well-followed bloggers.”<sup>28</sup>

Although blogging in Malaysia did not become common until the development and widespread availability of user-friendly blog hosting Web sites, such as *LiveJournal* in March 1999, *Blogger* in August 1999, and *WordPress* in 2003, the earliest blogs emerged in the wake of the 1998 sacking and subsequent arrest of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, which catalyzed nascent online activism more broadly. Within a few months of his arrest, over fifty pro-Anwar Web sites had emerged, circulating Anwar’s letters from prison, eyewitness accounts of demonstrations, and foreign news reports of the political crisis. Among the most prominent and influential of the earliest blogs was the Free Anwar Campaign Web site run by Raja Petra Kamaruddin (which later would become *Malaysia Today*) and MGG Pillai’s *Sang Kancil* (The Mouse Deer). By the 2008 general elections, blogging in Malaysia not only had become a mainstream activity, but also, as Weiss notes, arguably had “altered the dynamics of political mobilization by offering a new sort of virtual soapbox.”<sup>29</sup>

As a result, according to some reports, Malaysia now has one of the highest numbers of blogs per capita in the world,<sup>30</sup> with 31 percent of Internet users in the country having an active profile on Google’s blogging site “Blogger,” alone. Indeed, data from Alexa shows that Blogger is the eighth most visited Web site in Malaysia. In terms of the significance and impact of blogging, the 2006 Harris Interactive/MSN Windows Live report<sup>31</sup> found that 74 percent of online

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<sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Surin, interview by Jason Abbott, Kuala Lumpur, July 30, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Surin, “Occupying the Internet,” 204.

<sup>29</sup> Meredith Weiss, “Parsing the Power of ‘New Media’ in Malaysia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 591-612.

<sup>30</sup> While calculating the number of blogs worldwide is extraordinarily imprecise since a large number of blogs remain online even if inactive, estimates nevertheless suggest that there are some 160 million blogs worldwide. In Malaysia, government ministers have suggested that the number of blogs in the country exceeds 500,000. See “Blogging in Malaysia Ranks among Highest in the World,” *Star* (April 3, 2008), <http://digital.asiaone.com/Digital/News/Story/A1Story20080403-57746.html> (accessed August 15, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> The report was conducted for Microsoft’s Windows Live platform, which includes a blogging service. It was conducted online, across seven markets: Hong Kong, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand, and 25,000 respondents took part. See “Blogging Phenomenon Sweeps Asia: According to New Research from Windows Live Spaces,” *Xinhua PRNewswire* (November 28, 2006), <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/blogging-phenomenon-sweeps-asia-56531722.html> (accessed August 5, 2012).

users stated that they were most interested in blogs by friends and relatives, followed by work colleagues with 25 percent. While blogs by politicians were poorly received, in Malaysia, 6 percent more respondents found them of interest compared to the region as whole. Although this suggests that political blogging may not be significant in terms of democratization, the survey also noted that half of all respondents found blog content to be as trustworthy as *traditional media*. Indeed, the news blog and blog agglomeration site, *Malaysia Today*,<sup>32</sup> is ranked as one of the top twenty Web sites in Malaysia, receiving over 1.5 million visits a day, of which 83 percent come from Malaysian Internet Protocol (IP) addresses.

While some studies of the 2008 election in Malaysia credited blogs for playing a decisive role in the unexpectedly strong performance by the opposition coalition, most relied on anecdotal evidence and elite interviews with bloggers and opposition figures. One of the few exceptions is Rachel Gong's quantitative analysis of parliamentary candidate blogs.<sup>33</sup> In her study, Gong found that, of the fifty-seven races that featured candidates who were bloggers, 77 percent belonged to the opposition.<sup>34</sup> She posits that blogs in Malaysia function in three ways. First, some prominent bloggers have become opinion leaders. Information obtained on blogs is channeled and diffused through social media and cellphone text messages to a broader audience until, she argues, at some point, the traditional media no longer feels pressured to continue to self-censor and the story becomes mainstream.<sup>35</sup> Second, blogs may shape the public agenda because they function as "a setting for social and political discourse."<sup>36</sup> Finally, blogs function as a means for collective mobilization, although, here, Gong gives particular attention to the election of a number of bloggers to political office in the 2008 election, including: Jeff Ooi, who won a seat on the island of Penang; Tony Pua, who won a seat in the capital, Kuala Lumpur; as well as Nik Azmi Nik Ahmed and Elizabeth Wong, noted human rights activists and media reform advocates. The main weakness of this approach is that Gong's examination of collective mobilization is limited to whether being a blogger had any impact on individual election outcomes rather than on any wider societal mobilization. Nevertheless, with this caveat, the research demonstrates that, in the 2008 election, bloggers

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<sup>32</sup> Deeply critical of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, the Web site's founder and chief editor, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, was arrested under the country's infamous Internal Security Act in September 2008. Although subsequently released, he fled to England (he has dual citizenship) during a criminal defamation case in 2009, citing fears that he might be arrested again. Due to repeated Denial of Service attacks, the Web site is hosted on foreign servers.

<sup>33</sup> Gong, "Internet Politics and State Media Control."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

were five times as likely to win an election compared to nonbloggers and that “running against a blogger (as opposed to a non-blogger) significantly reduced a candidate’s odds of winning by 26 percent.”<sup>37</sup> The results are for a single election, however, and there is evidence to suggest that, since 2008, blogging has become less significant in Malaysia. Jeff Ooi, whose *Screenshots* blog won *Reporters Without Borders’* Freedom Blogs Award in 2005, and who was elected to parliament in 2008, stopped blogging in 2011, blaming the growth of Twitter for “edging out the traditional outlets of print and electronic media.”<sup>38</sup> Others argue that opposition blogs have been increasingly “drowned out” by the growth of progovernment bloggers, many of whom are paid handsomely by the ruling party.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the arrest of a small number of prominent bloggers,<sup>40</sup> coupled with the blocking of a number of Web sites by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission in June 2011,<sup>41</sup> may be having the effect of making more opposition voices engage in self-censorship.

### The Internet as Public Space in Malaysia

Of growing interest in the literature on the socio-political impact of the Internet is the notion that new information communication technologies expand the potential and possibilities for participation, both political and otherwise. Of particular influence is the work of Habermas<sup>42</sup> and his concept of the “public sphere” as an arena for collective discourse and rational-critical deliberation. While Habermas’s concept of the public sphere is grounded in the historical experience of coffee shops in seventeenth-century England, many see the Internet as a “virtual” public sphere in which rational deliberation can occur in a largely egalitarian environment, and, in so doing, expand the potential and possibilities for political participation. Partly because of these alleged egalitarian and libertarian features of the Internet, it is of little surprise that, in autocratic regimes, opposition political parties and civil society are among

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>38</sup> Hawkeye, “A Pioneer Blogger Calls It a Day,” *Free Malaysia Today* (May 4, 2011), <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2011/05/04/a-pioneer-blogger-calls-it-a-day/> (accessed March 12, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Haris Zalkapli, journalist and blogger, interview by Jason Abbott via e-mail, November 8, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> “Malaysia Arrests Saudi Blogger over Prophet Mohammad Tweets,” *Reuters* (February 10, 2012), <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/02/10/malaysia-saudi-blogger-idINDEE81902W20120210> (accessed November 8, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Although these were file-sharing sites rather than “political” sites. See “No More Free Downloads as MCMC Blocks 10 File Sharing Sites,” *Star* (June 11, 2011), <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/6/11/nation/8879884&sec=nation> (accessed November 8, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

the first to go online.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in the case of Malaysia, this latter hypothesis certainly seems to be supported by the evidence.

All of Malaysia's major opposition political parties developed Web sites that enabled them to circumvent the restrictions on the print media very early in the development of Internet activity. Ironically, attempts by the Malaysian government to restrict the offline publications of the opposition actually contributed to the increased sophistication and innovation of online publications. For example, in March 2000, the Malaysian government restricted the Islamic party, PAS, to bi-monthly publications of its previously bi-weekly newspaper, *Harakah*. The response of PAS was to switch resources into an online version of the paper, *Harakah Daily*, which within a year had incorporated "online television" and continued to add functionality at a rapid pace. Today, *Harakah Daily* includes a Malay and an English-language site, multimedia resources, letters pages, columns, Rich Site Summary (RSS) and Twitter feeds, and a link to its Facebook page. Despite limited resources, opposition Web sites were initially more sophisticated than their progovernment coalition counterparts. Measuring the discernible impact of this on the political process in Malaysia is difficult, but there is evidence from several academic studies that employed qualitative interviews of elite actors that the Internet played a role in the strong performances by the opposition in both 1999 and 2008. While not causal, such studies support the argument by Chadwick that, in regimes like Malaysia, the Internet "allows previously marginalized or even new parties to emerge and compete with established players."<sup>44</sup> Other forms of e-participation include the growing propensity of Malaysians to use online fora to critique, to fact-check, to scrutinize, and to hold both journalists and politicians accountable. As Jacqueline Surin comments, "What has happened is that people are now realizing what is produced by the institutional media and that there are now counter narratives...so more people question their reliability and accuracy."<sup>45</sup>

In addition to online independent journalism such as *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Insider*, and the *Nutgraph*, online activism also has proved a fillip to the broader movement for media freedom. The journalists who created the now defunct online news portal, *Saski* (Witness), also set up the nonprofit organization, the *Center for Independent Journalism* (CIJ), to advocate for greater freedom of expression and to improve standards of journalism in the country.<sup>46</sup> Other media freedom groups created in the wake of the 1998

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<sup>43</sup> Howard, "The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy."

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communications Technologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 148.

<sup>45</sup> Jacqueline Surin interview.

<sup>46</sup> See Tapsell, "The Media Freedom Movement in Malaysia," 619.

Reformasi movement included KAMI, Inisiatif Wartawan, and Charter 2000.<sup>47</sup> While several of the original Internet news portals are no longer active and others struggle to remain financially viable, the co-founder and editor of *Malaysiakini* maintains that the Internet “helped put press freedom on the front burner.”<sup>48</sup> Although expressing caution and some pessimism about the overall impact on Malaysia’s semi-authoritarian regime, Tapsell largely concurs with Gan’s assessment, arguing that “[t]he media freedom movement in Malaysia illustrates that the Internet can assist the opposition and create a *space for openness and debate*” (emphasis added).<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, before waxing lyrical about the normatively desirable ways in which the Internet has expanded the public sphere in Malaysia, it is important to note that, as in much of the world, the overwhelming use of the Internet by the Malaysian public is for trivial and banal purposes. Moreover, the medium also has facilitated the rise of virulently nationalistic and extremist voices.

### **The Internet and Socio-Political Mobilization in Malaysia**

If we are to demonstrate that the Internet and new social media are democratizing, in addition to enabling the democratization of information, we would expect to see evidence that these technologies and tools are also used to mobilize political opposition. For example, in their analysis of the impact of social media in the Arab Spring, Howard and Muzzamil<sup>50</sup> remark that, “social protests... [cascade] from country to country, largely because digital media have allowed communities to unite around shared grievances and nurture *transportable strategies for mobilizing* against dictators”;<sup>51</sup> furthermore, digital media provide the “logistical infrastructure”<sup>52</sup> for such mobilization to occur, as the Bersih rallies in Malaysia of 2007, 2011, and 2012 illustrate.

The Bersih coalition for clean and fair elections (*Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil*), grew out of the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, which was founded in 2005 by prominent opposition politicians, including Anwar’s wife, Wan Azizah (then leader of Keadilan), Nasharudin Mat Isa (of the Islamic Party, PAS), and Lim Guan Eng and Teresa Kok (of the Democratic Action Party). In November 2007, it organized a mass walk in Kuala Lumpur

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<sup>47</sup> While these groups were able to organize a memorandum calling for the repeal of the Printing Press and Publications Act on World Press Freedom Day in 1999 (see Tapsell, “The Media Freedom Movement in Malaysia”), only CIJ remains operational.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Gan, “Virtual Democracy in Malaysia: The Internet Has Helped Put Press Freedom on the Front Burner,” *Nieman Reports* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 65.

<sup>49</sup> Tapsell, “The Media Freedom Movement in Malaysia,” 38.

<sup>50</sup> Philip Howard and Muzamil M. Hussain, “The Role of Digital Media,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 3 (2011): 35-48.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

to present a memorandum to the Malaysian King calling for electoral reform. The walk was dispersed by force, including the use of chemical-laced water cannons. While the Internet had a relatively limited role in the organization of the first Bersih rally, restricted coverage of the event in traditional media was countered by widespread coverage online. In particular, video footage of the event by the Qatari-based satellite news network, Al-Jazeera, was virally distributed on Youtube to counter government reports that fewer than four thousand demonstrators took part.<sup>53</sup>

Two further demonstrations, Bersih 2.0 (2011) and Bersih 3.0 (2012), were organized largely via social media, after the government hampered attempts to organize nationwide “roadshows” by arresting activists. The scale of the third rally, estimated by independent sources to be between 80,000 and 100,000, was the largest protest in Malaysia since independence. What is more, social media enabled simultaneous protests and demonstrations of solidarity by Malaysians in thirty-five countries worldwide, including in fifteen cities in the United States. While the scale of most of these solidarity protests was small,<sup>54</sup> what they and the main rally demonstrate is that “social media has particularly influenced the way people view the rallies themselves. It has normalized the idea of protest.”<sup>55</sup> As well as playing an important role in organizing the rally, Facebook and Twitter became pivotal in providing updates to protestors on where to go and where to avoid riot police,<sup>56</sup> while Youtube made it harder for the government to control the narrative, as thousands of Malaysians uploaded videos of the demonstration. Moreover, images from the protests also reveal how the Internet has helped to spread a global meme of protest. Taking inspiration from the Occupy Wall Street movement, many Malaysians wore the Guy Fawkes mask borrowed by the “hacktivist” group, Anonymous, from the cult graphic novel and movie, *V for Vendetta*.<sup>57</sup>

The broader ramifications of the growth in social media use in Malaysia are obvious. With over thirteen million Facebook users in a population of just over twenty-eight million, and 1.1 million Twitter users, as Weiss comments, “these tools allow and... encourage the merging of online and offline communities”<sup>58</sup> in much the same way as we saw in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring. Indeed, while this essay does not claim a causal relationship between the

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, “All That Crap,” *Malaysia Today* (December 17, 2007), <http://www.malaysia-today.net/archives/archives-2007/20-all-that-crap> (accessed May 10, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> A notable exception was in Melbourne, where over one thousand Malaysians gathered.

<sup>55</sup> Ambiga Sreenevasan, co-chair of Bersih 3.0, interview with *Canadian Journalists for Free Expression* (September 25, 2012), <http://www.cjfe.org/resources/features/interview-organizing-malaysias-largest-protests-over-50-years> (accessed May 5, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Weiss, “Parsing the Power of ‘New Media’ in Malaysia,” 601.

<sup>57</sup> Although Malaysians colored the masks yellow, the trademark color of the Bersih movement.

<sup>58</sup> Weiss, “Parsing the Power of ‘New Media’ in Malaysia,” 19.

growth of Internet use in Malaysia and the incidence of mass demonstrations, there have been significantly more mass demonstrations in the country in the past few years than at any point since the infamous racial riots of 1969.

However, despite the obvious democratizing effects of the Internet in the country, perhaps the most instructive lesson from Malaysia is that there has been little liberalization of the regime. While there have been some modest reforms,<sup>59</sup> these have been largely cosmetic, with the government retaining significant powers to arrest, detain, and censure dissenting voices. Moreover, the deployment of progovernment bloggers and “cyber-troopers” modeled on China’s Fifty Cent Party (see below) as well as the increased use of defamation suits against bloggers<sup>60</sup> suggest that the Malaysian government’s response to its opponents is becoming more sophisticated.

## **The Internet and Democratization in China**

We argue that there are three major structural factors in the development and use of Internet in China that explain why China’s experience with democratization via the Internet has differed from that of Malaysia. First, the impact of the Tiananmen protests and the spatial location of Internet development in China influenced the degree to which the regime saw the technology as a potential threat. Second, China’s legacy of state control of the communication infrastructure made it much easier, compared to the Malaysian case, for Chinese authorities to control the content available to domestic users. Finally, the demographics of Internet use suggest that those most likely to mobilize against the state are the least likely to use the Internet.

### ***The Origin of the Internet in China***

The Chinese government’s initial approach to the Internet shared some similarities with that of the Malaysian government, but also reflected the long shadow of the Tiananmen Square protests. During the 1980s, many Chinese scholars were influenced by the arguments of Alvin Toffler about the technological Third Wave that would transform society.<sup>61</sup> Joining the global interest in Internet technologies, Chinese academics established the first Internet link to the outside world in 1987, and, to connect Chinese physicists to their European colleagues, the link was expanded in 1993.<sup>62</sup> Network access

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<sup>59</sup> Principally, changes to the legislative means by which civil liberties and freedom of expression are curtailed.

<sup>60</sup> For example, in 2011, blogger Amizudin Ahmat was found guilty of defaming the Minister of Information, Communications and Culture, Rais Yatim, and fined U.S. \$100,000.

<sup>61</sup> William Foster and Seymour E. Goodman, *The Diffusion of the Internet in China* (Stanford, CA: Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, November 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Jack Linchuan Qiu, “Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces,” *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 25.

expanded to other Chinese universities in the mid-1990s and then outward again to commercial and personal users in the late 1990s.

The timing and location of Internet development in China undermined opportunities to turn it into an important political tool. The events in Tiananmen Square alerted the leadership to the power and impact of new technologies, as students used fax machines to connect to the outside world and each other, keeping themselves informed and organized, despite an official media blackout.<sup>63</sup> After Tiananmen, the Chinese leaders refocused attention on social stability, and the Internet was, from the beginning, seen as another channel for potential discontent.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, the Internet remained, contra the Malaysia experience, primarily within the walls of academia during its early development. University-based Internet bulletin boards (BBSs) were the primary means of accessing the Internet content until at least the mid-2010s.<sup>65</sup> Throughout modern Chinese history, universities have been one of the primary vectors of protests, so it is perhaps no surprise that, at an early date, the leadership would perceive the potential threat of the new technology.

### ***Legacy of State Control***

The development of the Internet as a public space in China is also mediated by the legacies of state control of the communications infrastructure. Compared to Malaysia, which predominantly has used the legal system to enforce rules and norms of expression, the Chinese government has owned the utilities that control access to the Internet. Despite China's opening up and reform movement that began in 1979, the communications sector remains heavily controlled by state entities. From the local Internet service provider (ISP) up to the network operator, all or almost all of the Internet traffic is routed through companies that, if not directly owned by the state, are at the least under heavy state influence. According to Qiu, each level of Internet control has agents of the state responsible for monitoring, and, if necessary, deleting content.<sup>66</sup>

With the success of private Internet ventures in the last ten years in China, the balance has shifted somewhat toward more legal-based sanctions against providers. Most online media live under constant threat of having their business licenses revoked if they are unable to effectively practice self-censorship, similar to the sanctions that authorities pursued in Malaysia.<sup>67</sup> One key difference, however, is that with state control of the communications

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<sup>63</sup> "Fax against Fictions," *Time* 133, no. 25 (1989): 32.

<sup>64</sup> Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces."

<sup>65</sup> Liang Guo, *Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities* (Beijing: Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, November 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces."

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's Censorship 2.0: How Companies Censor Bloggers," *First Monday* 14, no. 2 (February 2009), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2378/2089> (last accessed December 4, 2013).

infrastructure, it is not possible for dissident sites to move offshore and remain accessible to residents in China. Scholars and journalists sometimes question the effectiveness of the Great Firewall,<sup>68</sup> which makes it difficult to access certain foreign Web sites from within China, but on the whole, it has proven to be resilient enough to prevent the vast majority of citizens from reading forbidden offshore content.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Internet Demographics***

As is typical with most developing countries, Internet use in China is growing rapidly but is still dominated by the young, the urban, and the relatively well-off.<sup>70</sup> This has important implications for whether aggrieved citizens are able to use it to mobilize against the state.

According to statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), while China added 55.8 million Internet users in 2011, Internet penetration in China remains under 40 percent.

The largest rise in users in 2011 occurred in the 30-39 age group. Overall, however, users aged 10-19 accounted for 26.7 percent of Internet users, while 20- to 29-year-olds and 30- to 39-year-olds accounted for 29.8 percent and 25.7 percent, respectively.

Additionally, the majority of users continue to reside in urban areas (73.5 percent), and while rural China boasts 136 million Internet users, the rural share of total Internet users actually declined to 26.5 percent, as Internet use continues to spread more quickly in urban areas.

While the overall pattern of Internet use is similar to other developing countries,<sup>71</sup> the urban-rural and rich-poor divide over Internet use matters a great deal, considering that most protests in China are over rural issues.<sup>72</sup> Those most likely to have the desire to mobilize against the state—those angry at primarily either illegal land seizures or official misbehavior—are least likely to (1) have Internet access and (2) be Internet savvy enough to effectively

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<sup>68</sup> Shanthy Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2003), and Oliver August, "The Great Firewall: China's Misguided," *WIRED* (October 23, 2007), [http://www.wired.com/politics/security/magazine/15-11/ff\\_chinafirewall?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/politics/security/magazine/15-11/ff_chinafirewall?currentPage=all) (last accessed December 4, 2013).

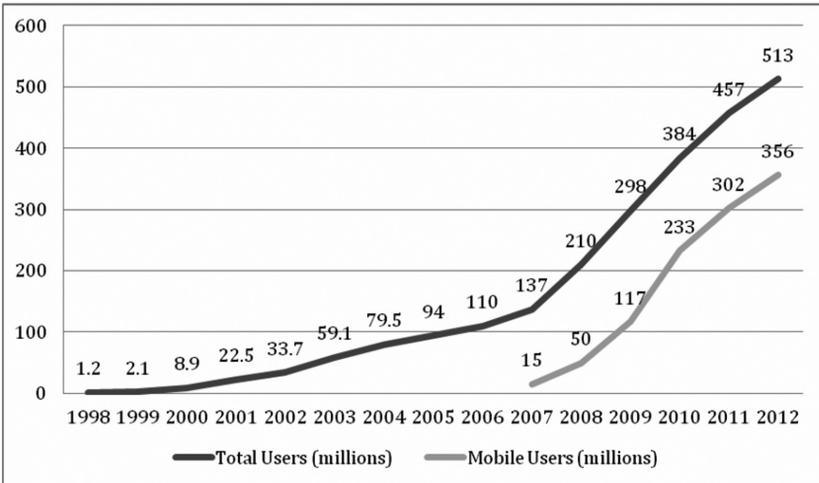
<sup>69</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China," *Public Choice* 134, no. 1 (2008): 31-46, doi:10.1007/s11127-007-9199-0.

<sup>70</sup> The only widely available statistics on Internet use in China are from the Computer Network Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Their reports are available at <http://www.apira.org/news.php?id=10>.

<sup>71</sup> Jeffrey James, "Mechanisms of Access to the Internet in Rural Areas of Developing Countries," *Telematics and Informatics* 27, no. 4 (November 2010): 370-376, doi:10.1016/j.tele.2010.02.002.

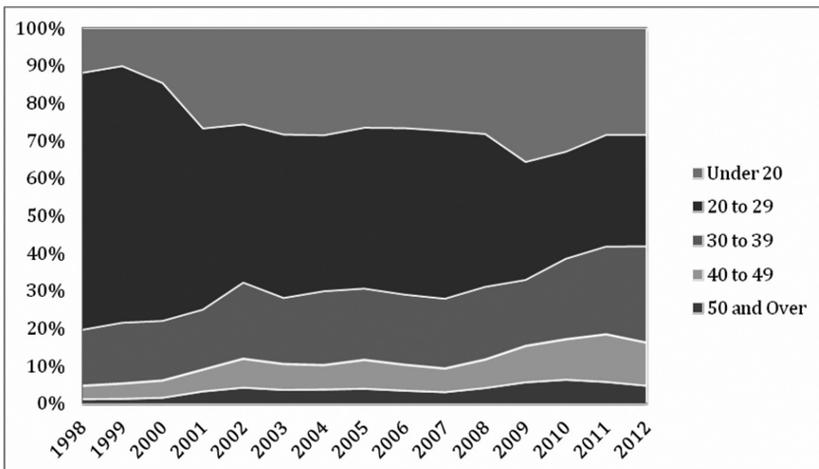
<sup>72</sup> Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Figure 1. Number of Chinese Internet Users



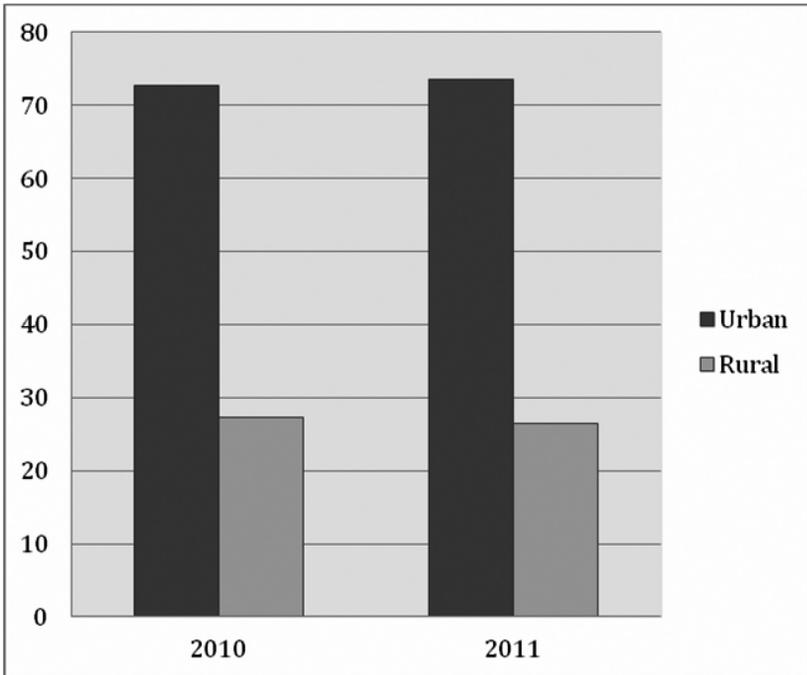
Source: *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (China Internet Network Information Center, January 2012), [http://www.apira.org/data/upload/The29thStatisticalReportonInternetDevelopmentinChina\\_hbwnp5.pdf](http://www.apira.org/data/upload/The29thStatisticalReportonInternetDevelopmentinChina_hbwnp5.pdf) (accessed November 3, 2012).

Figure 2. Chinese Internet User Age Distribution



Source: *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*.

Figure 3. Urban vs. Rural Internet Use in China



Source: *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*.

mobilize via electronic resources, given the state’s monitoring and control apparatus.

These three key influencers of Internet use and development provide a compelling explanation as to why the Internet in China has not had the same positive impact on democratization as in Malaysia. On the three axes of democratization, the Internet in China has made gaining access to information easier, which is an important part of democratization. However, the record is more mixed on whether the Internet has provided a public political space. Finally, the Internet has not provided the tools to help mobilize dissenters into an antiregime force.

### **The Internet as a Source for Information**

“The mountains are high and the emperor is far away (山高皇帝遠),” echoes a familiar Chinese proverb describing the inability of officials in Beijing to monitor and control local governance. Yet, while the mountains are as high as ever, the Internet has helped to close the distance to Beijing, primarily by

providing better access to information. While we are somewhat skeptical about the extent to which the Internet has opened up the public sphere and even more so about its use in organizing mobilization in China, there is some evidence to suggest that the Internet has become an important tool for providing access to information that can assist Chinese in resisting the state, especially the local state when it is in violation of national laws, regulations, and policies. Yet, in large part due to the fairly unique success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in censoring and controlling China's Internet, the most successful uses of the Internet in challenging the state are actually highly mediated ones. As opposed to Malaysia, where netizens may challenge the ruling party by directly appealing to voters, the Internet in China is often most effective in helping Chinese to appeal to state power rather than oppose it, for example, by assisting plaintiffs to find lawyers willing to take their cases to court. The state and its censors may even accept many of these apparently oppositional actions, such as suing the state or exposing local corruption, implicitly or explicitly.

### *Mediated Activism*

Far from the angry-mob justice meted out by China's "human flesh search engines,"<sup>73</sup> the Internet also has become an important, if still underutilized, tool for connecting ordinary Chinese to journalists, lawyers, activists, and others who may be capable of helping them resolve a problem with the local state. This use of the Internet becomes particularly important in controversial cases, such as class-action lawsuits and administrative cases, in which the local state is the defendant. In these types of cases, political pressure and general difficulty may render local lawyers unwilling to take cases, and, even if willing, they are unlikely to have the necessary experience and expertise.<sup>74</sup> Lawyers with experience litigating administrative cases, however, often advertise their expertise on legal Web sites such as findlaw.cn. In a 2005 case from Zhejiang, for example, a group of peasants found four of five local lawyers unwilling to take their case and the fifth wanted to charge 100,000 RMB, a fee that was well beyond their means. It was only through the Internet that the peasants were able to reach out and find a lawyer, over one thousand kilometers distant in Beijing, willing to represent them for a reasonable fee.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Anne S. Y. Cheung, "China Internet Going Wild: Cyber-hunting versus Privacy Protection," *Computer Law & Security Review* 25, no. 3 (2009): 275-279, doi:10.1016/j.clsr.2009.03.007.

<sup>74</sup> For a review of literature on Administrative Law in China, see Jonathan Kinkel and William Hurst, "Review Essay—Access to Justice in Post-Mao China: Assessing the Politics of Criminal and Administrative Law," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011): 467-499.

<sup>75</sup> 林嵬 Lin Wei and 張軍 Zhang Jun, "Zhejiang 83 Ming cunmin shangshu guowuyuan gao ying shengzhengfu cuowu caijue," 浙江83名村民上書國務院 告贏省政府錯誤裁決 [83 Zhejiang villagers petition the State Council regarding the provincial government's mistaken ruling] (2007), <http://www.703804.com/redirect.php?tid=333476&goto=lastpost> (accessed March 30, 2010).

Yet, at least in the case of lawyers, the Internet is still a starkly underutilized tool. While a simple search on baidu.com or google.com easily could help a potential plaintiff find experienced and appropriate legal representation, few Chinese who want legal representation seem to have made this transition to cyberspace. Table one, from a 2009 online survey of lawyers by Ethan Michelson and Sida Liu,<sup>76</sup> demonstrates that the Internet is still a relatively secondary tool for finding lawyers.

Table 2. Over the past year, what proportion of all our clients were found through Internet discussion forums or electronic bulletin boards?

	Number of Lawyers	Percentage of Lawyers
All	1	0.13%
Most	24	3.19%
Some	122	15.58%
Small	286	36.53%
None	349	44.57%

On the other hand, the Internet helps professionals network and provides a source of information to them other than that offered directly by the state. Whereas once lower court judges “had little option but to consult higher courts,” they now “routinely consult the [I]nternet to assist them when they encounter new questions,” a phenomenon that seems to be particularly important “in less developed areas,” where the judges have few other resources.<sup>77</sup> Communication and networking among judges, much of it online, “may lead to more consistent application of the law”<sup>78</sup> and the development of a professional identity, which can assist judges, “as they seek to combat interference from both within and outside the courts.”<sup>79</sup>

As is the case with lawyers, the Internet can be useful in helping individuals get their story out to journalists, but, as with judges, it also is a vital tool for sharing information among journalists,

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<sup>76</sup> Ethan Michelson and Sida Liu, “What Do Chinese Lawyers Want? Political Values and Legal Practice,” *China’s Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* (2010): 312-314.

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin L. Liebman, “China’s Courts: Restricted Reform,” *China Quarterly* 191 (2007): 631.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

[who] often get the information for a story from their colleagues in the region, rather than having to conduct the original investigations and reporting themselves. Interviewees describe this technique as “spilling news,” or sharing sensitive stories with journalists from other critical publications when pressure from local officials or other actors means they are unable to cover it themselves.<sup>80</sup>

Since the journalists capable of publishing a story are likely to be hundreds or thousands of miles away in Beijing or Guangdong, fast and relatively ubiquitous Internet access greatly facilitates getting the story out, even if it will ultimately be publicized through more traditional means, such as television or newspapers.<sup>81</sup>

### ***Improved Access to News and Justice***

According to the CNNIC 2012 report, news was the fourth most popular use of the Internet in China, and while the total number of online news users increased slightly in 2011 to over 366 million, growth in online news continues to be outpaced by online videos and games. The trend seems to reflect an educational divide, as 87.6 percent of Internet users with a college degree used the Internet for news, whereas the rate was only 62.1 percent among users who had only a junior high school education.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, online media in China offers space for news and information that is freer than the traditional media, though still limited. “[I]nternet news providers, in particular the three major official [I]nternet news services... are able to publish more than they could in their respective print editions.”<sup>83</sup> This “stem[s] from relaxed editorial oversight of web news by their own institutions, and also from the fact that they are able to react to news reports quickly. The websites of such official media outlets are also more heavily commercialized,” having “a much greater financial stake in attracting readers,” and hence a stronger impulse toward creating news of interest to readers rather than stories pushed by superiors.<sup>84</sup> Overall, it is fair to say that netizens are more informed and more politically aware than their

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<sup>80</sup> John Wagner Givens and Maria Repnikova, “Advocates of Change in Authoritarian Regimes: How Chinese Lawyers and Chinese and Russian Journalists Stay out of Trouble,” *SSRN eLibrary* (2011): 16, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1911590](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1911590) (accessed April 26, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, and Benjamin L. Liebman, “Changing Media, Changing Courts,” in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150-174.

<sup>82</sup> *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*.

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin L. Liebman, “Watchdog or Demagogue? The Media in the Chinese Legal System,” *Columbia Law Review* 105 (2005): 60.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

nonconnected counterparts.<sup>85</sup> This improved knowledge, however, is limited by official controls, despite advances in technology that help netizens undermine censorship attempts.

### ***The Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism: The China Corollary***

The fact that it is fairly easy to get over, around, or under China's Great Firewall is well-known.<sup>86</sup> Yet, it requires a concerted effort, one that the vast majority of China's netizens simply do not bother to make. It is difficult to estimate how many users regularly bother to vault the Great Firewall, but comparing numbers of Chinese users of Twitter and Sina Weibo, one of China's most popular twitter-clones, provides a reasonable approximation. While Sina Weibo boasted an impressive 368 million registered users in mid-2012,<sup>87</sup> Twitter probably had somewhere around 35.5 million users in China.<sup>88</sup> At best, then, somewhere around 10 percent of Chinese netizens make the effort to circumvent the states' blockades, but if one considers that China's other popular twitter clones, Netease and Tencent, boast 260 and 469 million users, respectively,<sup>89</sup> the number may actually be closer to 3 percent. This figure seems to accord with the claim of dissident Chinese journalist Michael Anti (a.k.a. Jing Zhao 趙靜) that "at least 95 percent of people don't care about censorship."<sup>90</sup>

The reason for these small percentages can be explained by the China corollary to the "Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism" developed by Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. The Cut Cat Theory holds that tools of Web 2.0 "designed to defeat state censorship... can be shut down with little political penalty, but broader tools that the larger population uses to, say, share pictures of cute cats are harder to shut down."<sup>91</sup> Networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, then, are useful to activists

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<sup>85</sup> Ya-Wen Lei, "The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens," *Political Communication* 28, no. 3 (2011): 291-322, doi:10.1080/10584609.2011.572449.

<sup>86</sup> Yu Liu and Dingding Chen, "Why China Will Democratize," *Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2012): 49-50, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2012.641918.

<sup>87</sup> "China's Forgotten 3rd Twitter Clone Hits 260 Million Users," *Tech in Asia*, <http://www.techinasia.com/netease-weibo-260-million-users-numbers/> (accessed November 2, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> Bruce Einhorn, "Facebook, Twitter Growth in China Has Lots of Caveats," *BusinessWeek: Technology* (September 28, 2012), <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-09-28/facebook-twitter-growth-in-china-has-lots-of-caveats> (accessed November 2, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, "Michael Anti and the End of the Golden Age of Blogs in China," *My Heart's in Accra* (November 27, 2007), <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2007/11/27/michael-anti-and-the-end-of-the-golden-age-of-blogs-in-china/> (accessed November 3, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Clay Shirky, "Political Power of Social Media—Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change," *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011): 37.

precisely because they are used primarily for apolitical but extremely popular purposes. Yet, “[b]y blocking access to non-Chinese Web 2.0 sites and building its own competitive set of sites,” forcing “the authors of [Chinese] Web 2.0 tools to become censors as well, ...China seems to have found its way around the Cute Cat Theory.”<sup>92</sup> While censored Malaysian activists simply moved their material overseas, the Chinese state can safely “block access to the Web 2.0 tools hosted outside of China and... frustrate activists, who would like to use those tools,” without “antagoniz[ing] the average user, who is probably better served by tools written in Chinese for a Chinese audience.”<sup>93</sup> While China’s Internet censorship is less than perfect, it seems to be having a significant impact on the tone and content of the Chinese Internet.

## **The Internet as a Public Sphere**

The development of the Internet in China has led to a broadening of the Habermasian public sphere, but only as long as discussions do not become too political. To Habermas, a public sphere is “when [citizens] confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest.”<sup>94</sup> These kinds of open opinion bazaars, both political and general, had been restricted heavily throughout China’s communist history. Mass media, up until the late 1990s, was almost completely state-owned.<sup>95</sup> Even after allowing for private mass media, state control over the editorial process of all media sources, even nonpolitical press, remains extensive.<sup>96</sup> This kind of control prevents true discussion of matters of public interest and limits the ability of all citizens to engage in the public sphere.

### ***Bulletin Boards and Social Media***

The Internet, however, has allowed for a much more free-wheeling gathering of opinions and viewpoints in China. The primary vehicle through which early Chinese Internet pioneers participated in the digital age was the bulletin-board site (BBS), which has a format similar to Internet discussion forums.<sup>97</sup> On

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<sup>92</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, “Cute Cat Theory: The China Corollary,” *My Heart’s in Accra* (December 3, 2007), <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2007/11/27/michael-anti-and-the-end-of-the-golden-age-of-blogs-in-china/> (accessed November 3, 2012).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (October 1, 1974): 49-55. doi:10.2307/487737.

<sup>95</sup> Jingrong Tong, “Press Self-censorship in China: A Case Study in the Transformation of Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 20, no. 5 (September 1, 2009): 593-612. doi:10.1177/0957926509106412.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Qiu, “Virtual Censorship in China.”

BBSs, users, rather than the state, set the agenda for discussion and no state checks, except on political posts, exist. Topics that the state propaganda bureau considered important were the ones that featured in newspapers, magazines, and other state-controlled periodicals. This agenda-setting power was a significant component of state efforts to build a nationwide, unified political community. BBSs, by contrast, developed their own subcultures, according to user interests. Users are the ones responsible for starting comment threads on BBSs, and threads that have no interest to netizens die off. The flow of conversation on BBSs is ultimately determined by community interest, not by state mandate, which is a key prerequisite to the existence of a public sphere. Evidence does suggest, however, that netizens are moving away from BBSs to newer forms of social media.<sup>98</sup>

According to the latest figures from the CNNIC Chinese Internet report, increasing numbers of users recount using social media, instant messaging, and microblogging (i.e., Twitter equivalents). These are fundamentally peer-to-peer communication technologies in which the state, aside from political topics, has shown little interest in controlling or directing the conversation. Additionally, as opposed to BBSs that are used primarily on university campuses, all users in China can participate. The impacts of all of these technology, as Zhixue Tai notes, are threefold:

First, it creates a new platform that was not available before for Chinese netizens to express their opinions online on just about anything... secondly, it produces a steady, core cohort of opinion leaders that constantly sway public opinion in China's cyberspace...thirdly the Internet allows an ever-increasing number of Chinese Net surfers to be exposed to the pulse of their Net pals' opinions.<sup>99</sup>

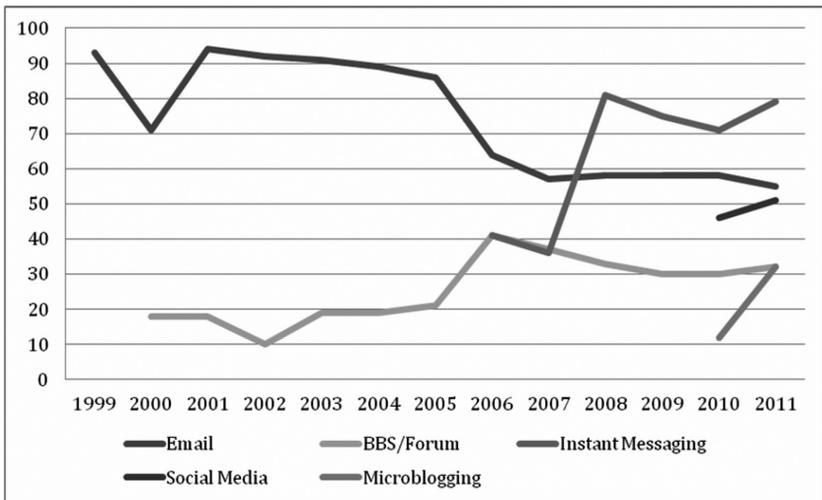
These changes have the cumulative effect of opening up the public discourse and scope of user experience. The BBSs' democratized communication agenda-setting and social media have expanded this possibility to all Internet users in China. These two features of the Internet fulfill Habermas's definition of a public sphere, but only as long as the topics are nonpolitical.

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<sup>98</sup> Zhihao Tang, "Bulletin Board Systems Suffer at Hands of the Web," *China Daily*, December 5, 2011, sec. Business.

<sup>99</sup> Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (New York: CRC Press, 2006).

Figure 4. Uses of the Internet in China



Source: *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*.

## A Political Public Space?

The Internet has led to the creation of only a limited political public space in China for several reasons. First, attempts to discuss political topics on discussion boards, BBSs, and other public forums are sometime “harmonized” (*hexie* 和諧) by authorities, which is a mocking term for comment deletion. This can spark an “arms race” between authorities and netizens, as netizens begin using Chinese character homophones of the blocked words to continue the discussion. When the drama surrounding disgraced Politburo member Bo Xilai began to unfold, his name was keyword-blocked by social media in China.<sup>100</sup> Netizens switched to using his Latin alphabet initials (BXL) and the phrase *buhou* (不厚) instead of his name, which literally means “not thick” in Chinese, a similar meaning to a reading of his surname character. These phrases were then blocked, and new phrases were invented again to get around the restrictions. While interested partisans enjoy playing the homophone/blocking game, these keyword blocks make it difficult for those unsophisticated in Internet use to participate in public debates and prevents those with less passionate interest to stay abreast of hot news stories. Just as most Chinese do not bother to vault the

<sup>100</sup> Dexter Roberts, “China Cracks Down on the Websites of Bo Xilai’s Supporters,” *BusinessWeek: Global\_economics* (April 9, 2012), <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-04-09/china-cracks-down-on-the-websites-of-bo-xilais-supporters> (accessed December 3, 2013).

Great Firewall, many will not follow constantly migrating keywords, and the overall impact of the keyword blocking is to sharply limit the scope and size of public debate over, and exposure to, any issue the regime deems sensitive.

Additionally, a true political public sphere requires the ability to conduct uncoerced discussions. In China, this requirement is challenged by the existence of the Fifty Cent Party (*wumaodang* 五毛黨), commentators who are paid by the government to lead the discussion on public forums in a proregime direction. Their role goes beyond just posting proregime comments:

The posts do not only praise or support the CCP and government policy, but also target government critics with negative remarks. Other forms of misdirection involve deliberate attempts to muddy the facts of a particular incident—for example, a false eyewitness can contradict the account of a netizen reporting a case of police abuse.<sup>101</sup>

The membership of the Fifty Cent Party was estimated to be about 280,000 as of 2008, suggesting that their posts pollute many online forums.<sup>102</sup> A Fifty Cent Party member, when interviewed, reckoned that somewhere between 10 to 20 percent of online posts were made by his co-party members.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, netizens are aware of these attempts to direct the discussion and thus react with cynicism and discussion derailment when someone makes a progovernment post, whether the post is made genuinely or not, further devaluing the quality of online discussions.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Sensationalism***

The limits of the Internet as a public sphere are highlighted by the often sensationalistic nature of news stories that careen around e-mail inboxes and social media in China. “Guo Yuanron...an employee of the Zhuxi county bureau of construction... had been petitioning higher authorities to report his bureau director for taking bribes when he was thrown into the psychiatric hospital on November 16, 1996.” Erroneously diagnosed with “obsessive schizophrenia

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<sup>101</sup> Sarah Cook, “China’s Growing Army of Paid Internet Commentators,” *Freedom at Issue* (October 11, 2011), <http://blog.freedomhouse.org/weblog/2011/10/chinas-growing-army-of-paid-internet-commentators.html> (accessed December 3, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> David Bandurski, “China’s Guerrilla War for the Web,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 2008.

<sup>103</sup> Weiwei Ai, “China’s Paid Trolls: Meet the 50-Cent Party,” *New Statesman* (October 17, 2012), <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2012/10/china's-paid-trolls-meet-50-cent-party> (accessed December 3, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> Rongbin Han, “Manufacturing Consent in Censored Cyberspace: State-Sponsored Online Commentators on Chinese Internet Forums,” *SSRN eLibrary* (2012), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2106461](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2106461) (accessed November 4, 2012).

of a hereditary nature,” Guo was kept locked up for fourteen years. His cause was taken up by Peng Baoquan, “a retired bank clerk from Shiyan, Hubei... [who] began writing [I]nternet postings...to try to help draw public attention to the plight of Guo,” but found the response “disappointing.” In order to attract more attention, Peng invented a twenty-four-year-old daughter for Guo, “who claimed to be a teacher who was willing to give away her virginity to help obtain her father’s release. The revised posting set off an outpouring of sympathy from thousands of Internet users, and it was picked up by mainstream media outlets. A mere three days later, Guo was released from [the] hospital.”<sup>105</sup>

The Gao incident demonstrates both the power and the fickleness of the Internet. While it can be an effective tool for spreading tales of official malfeasance, it seems to be effective primarily only in cases in which government misdeeds are not only acute but sensationalist. Tales of “an official in Ningxia who had neglected to rescue a drowning girl”<sup>106</sup> and the children of officials brazenly violating the law,<sup>107</sup> may result in swift justice, but most complaints of corruption, abuse of power, and wrongful imprisonment, no matter how justified, are simply too common to attract much attention. The “human flesh search engine” may occasionally be leveled at official malfeasance, but it seems more likely to target cheating spouses and animal abusers.<sup>108</sup> The discourse of the Chinese Internet, then, often more closely resembles hysterical mob justice than discursive democracy.

## The Internet as a Space for Mobilization

Citizen-organized protest in China exists in a highly marginal position—it is tolerated to the extent that the leadership feels that it serves the need of the state, but no further. Useful protests, whether against corrupt local officials or against perceived foreign enemies, are useful only if they are able to be kept localized and easily shut down. The Internet, by its very nature, is globalized rather than localized, and, therefore, it is no surprise that the regime has been active in preventing any attempt to mobilize online.

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<sup>105</sup> Raymond Li, “Web Campaign Mixes Fact and Fiction to End Petitioner’s 14 Years in Detention,” *South China Morning Post* (January 13, 2011), <http://www.scmp.com/article/735551/web-campaign-mixes-fact-and-fiction-end-petitioners-14-years-detention> (accessed November 4, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Liebman, “Watchdog or Demagogue?” 59.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Wines, “China’s Censorship Backfires in ‘Li Gang’ Case,” *New York Times* (November 17, 2010), sec. World / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/18/world/asia/18li.html> (accessed November 5, 2012), and “Chinese Hit-and-Run Man Jailed,” *BBC* (January 30, 2011), sec. Asia-Pacific, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12317756> (accessed November 5, 2012).

<sup>108</sup> Cheung, “China Internet Going Wild.”

### *Playing into Their Hands?*

Much literature on state-society relations in China suggests that the Chinese state strategically tolerates, and may even encourage, a variety of apparently oppositional activities, including complaints<sup>109</sup> and litigation against the state,<sup>110</sup> and even protests.<sup>111</sup> Briefly summarized, the strategic toleration of these activities serves two interlocking functions from the point of view of the state. First, allowing ordinary Chinese to expose problems at the local level provides valuable information to the state, especially assistance in monitoring its own agents at a low cost.<sup>112</sup> Many of the instances in which the Internet has been used to expose corruption, malfeasance, and wrongdoing of local officials seem to fall into this category. These types of incidents help the upper levels of the state to improve local governance, diffuse potentially dangerous situations, and promote the general impression of caring and competence,<sup>113</sup> likely strengthening their grip on power.

While many such stories may become public, perhaps even becoming wildly popular, it is often gaining the attention of the state that matters. Sometimes, the publicity is just a means for grievances to get past the protective umbrellas (*baohu san* 保護傘) that officials use to hide their misdeeds from higher-ups.<sup>114</sup> Even when ordinary Chinese manage to connect with reporters, publicizing a story either on the Internet or through traditional media is not necessarily the most effective method for ensuring that a problem is addressed. In many cases, a report of official wrong-doing may be “more effective if it were filed not publicly but internally, within the party.”<sup>115</sup> The Internet in China, therefore, can be a more effective tool for providing information to the state than to the people.

Second, the Chinese state seems to understand the importance of leaving channels open so that frustrated citizens may blow off steam and feel that they

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<sup>109</sup> Carl F. Minzner, “Xinfang: An Alternative to Formal Chinese Legal Institutions,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 42 (2006): 103, and Taisu Zhang, “The Xinfang Phenomenon: Why the Chinese Prefer Administrative Petitioning over Litigation,” *SSRN eLibrary* (2008), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1098417> (accessed February 28, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> For an excellent review of the fairly extensive literature on administrative litigation, see Kinkel and Hurst, “Access to Justice in Post-Mao China.”

<sup>111</sup> Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Peter L. Lorentzen, “Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime,” *Social Science Research Network* (2010), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=995330](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=995330) (accessed May 4, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> This type of system is sometimes referred to as “fire alarm monitoring” and is seen as a more efficient alternative to more costly “police patrol monitoring.” See Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (1984): 165-179.

<sup>113</sup> O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 70-73.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>115</sup> “Rural Activism: Working the System,” *Economist* (September 29, 2012), <http://www.economist.com/node/21563780> (accessed November 5, 2012).

have been allowed to say their piece.<sup>116</sup> Writing about established one-party systems, Huntington suggested that “[g]roups must be allowed to express their conflicting views in the appropriate arenas in the state structure...” but that “[t]he party, of course, remains the exclusive guardian of the interests of society as a whole.”<sup>117</sup> The Internet seems particularly well-suited to this function, as it allows people to feel they have voiced their opinions in a public sphere, yet one in which they may be lost in a torrent of comments or astroturfed over by the Fifty Cent Party<sup>118</sup> and in which mobilization is at least one step removed, as opposed to allowing protesters to address an angry crowd, for example. That the CCP understands this is suggested by the fact that the state is much less concerned with censoring antistate vitriol than with efforts to organize and mobilize.<sup>119</sup>

### ***Mobilization against the State***

While the state may allow blowing off steam online and permit localized physical protests to occur, it takes a strong stance against using the Internet to mobilize for specific-issue protests and an even more maximalist position against any kind of larger political organizing. As King et al. find in a large-n survey of Chinese Internet posts, “the censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content. Censorship is oriented toward attempting to forestall collective activities that are occurring now or may occur in the future.”<sup>120</sup> These kinds of Internet-organized protests are seen by the regime as much more likely to spiral out of control, and so the censorship expends significant effort to prevent their occurrence.

When the regime does allow issue-based protests, it is only in the special cases whereby protests actually help the regime. Foreign policy protests have a long history in China, dating back to the May Fourth Movement of 1919 against the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Chinese authorities have been careful to strategically signal when they will permit foreign policy protests (often using phrases such as “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people”), but mobilization of such protests via the Internet is still thoroughly circumscribed and the protests are, at least to an extent, stage-managed by the

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<sup>116</sup> O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, and Lorentzen, “Regularized Rioting.”

<sup>117</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Social and Institutional Dynamics of One-Party Systems,” in *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society: The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems*, ed. Samuel P. Huntington and Clement Henry Moore (New York: Basic Books, 1970): 3-47.

<sup>118</sup> Han, “Manufacturing Consent in Censored Cyberspace.”

<sup>119</sup> Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013): 1-18.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

state.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, even when protests over larger political issues are allowed, the government places significant limits on mobilization, both offline and on.

It must be said that should an essay such as this one have been written comparing Egypt and Tunisia in mid-2010, it is likely that it would not have predicted the Arab Spring. It must be recognized, therefore, that the Internet provides an infrastructure that can greatly facilitate the rapid spread of yet unseen revolutions. But, whereas the Arab Spring used a variety of foreign-based platforms that the Middle Eastern regimes proved unable to manage, the Chinese state has made unprecedented progress in moving Chinese Internet users onto mainland-based platforms that it can more easily control. Only time will tell, therefore, if the difference between Twitter and Weibo could mean the difference between the success or failure of an oppositional or even revolutionary movement.

## CONCLUSION

As we have argued, there are several major differences between the cases of Malaysia and China that would seem to explain the significant variation in the extent to which the Internet has contributed to democracy. First, the ruling party in Malaysia thought of the Internet as a way of promoting development and, therefore, did not see its value as a political tool until political entrepreneurs already had taken advantage of the opportunity. In China, however, because the Tiananmen protests and the Internet first sprung up on campuses and around the same time, the Chinese state made the connection and recognized the threat posed by the Internet early in its development. Second, in comparison to Malaysia's market-based model, the CCP's history and ongoing control of the communications infrastructure facilitated state control of content available to domestic users. Finally, the Chinese urban middle class, the most likely demographic to use the Internet as a tool for mobilization, has been kept fairly sated with dramatic economic growth.

Taking a step back from the specifics of the Malaysia and China cases, however, we would reaffirm that the Internet is only a piece of communications technology like a telephone, a printing press, or any other. We therefore would emphasize, not the revolutionary nature of the Internet, but the continuity by which existing practices, movements, and actors move online. Many of the most important oppositional voices on the Malaysian Internet were already in existence and the Internet was simply a new, albeit powerful, forum that allowed them to avoid censorship. Similarly, blogs were a powerful tool for promoting the campaigns of opposition candidates. Both of these phenomena

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<sup>121</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, "Powerful Patriots: Nationalism, Diplomacy, and the Strategic Logic of Anti-foreign Protest" (January 1, 2008), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9z19141j#page-211> (accessed December 3, 2013).

stand in stark contrast to China, where there were no oppositional journalists to subvert censorship by going online and no elections for which bloggers could campaign.

The fact that there is continuity of control despite the technological disruption of the Internet suggests that the process of democratization, as we define it, is a contextual one. Successful strategies in one context are not likely to be easily mapped onto other countries with different experiences of Internet development. Moreover, our findings suggest that the process of democratization is neither monolithic nor teleological. The Internet has presented new possibilities for communication and interaction in both Malaysia and China, but not in all areas, and, as we have seen in Malaysia, some of these gains are potentially reversible. Thus, while our research does not support a triumphant account of the possibilities of the Internet, it does suggest that certain contexts and experiences will lead to limited forms of democratization. And that could be said to be progress.