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New Media and Old Dilemmas: Online Protest and Cyber Repression in Asia Panel Report

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By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

As I noted in an article I wrote for the *Dissent* website earlier this week, one of the major China-related stories of 2011 has been the government's ever-increasing crackdown on public expression. What started subtly back in January—a slowdown in internet service here and there, more websites (including this one) being blocked—became a full-blown international issue on April 3, when artist and activist Ai Weiwei was detained at the Beijing airport. Ai's disappearance has sparked a flood of analysis and commentaries: Colin Jones discusses "The Purge of Ai Weiwei" at *Dissent*, Evan Osnos at the *New Yorker* has written a series of blog posts on the subject (here, here, here, here, and here), and the shows Bob Dylan played in Beijing and Shanghai last week became entangled in the issue as a number of pundits asked "Did Bob Dylan sell out?" for not calling on the Chinese government to release Ai (more links than I can list, but check our Twitter feed for a selection and also listen to friend of the blog Jon Wiener discuss the issue with Dylan-ologist Sean Wilentz during his latest "On the Radio" show).

Before Ai Weiwei's arrest and Dylan's performances, though, I had the chance to consider China's tightening of the internet within a broader context, as I attended a lively conversation on the topic at the Association for Asian Studies' annual meeting in Honolulu two weeks ago. I was at the conference to assist with three "Late-Breaking News" panels funded by the Luce Foundation, including one entitled "New Media and Old Dilemmas: Online Protest and Cyber Repression in Asia." This panel brought together a range of journalists and academics: Orville Schell of the Asia Society served as moderator and Rob Gifford of NPR and Ananth Krishnan of *The Hindu* traveled from China to participate, joined by freelance journalist Angilee Shah and USC professor Andrew Lih, author of *The Wikipedia Revolution*. For China Beat readers unable to attend the meeting (start planning for Toronto 2012!), here's a quick summary of the presentations each panelist gave during the session.

Panelists, L-R: Rob Gifford, Ananth Krishnan, Orville Schell, Angilee Shah, Andrew Lih

Schell noted in his remarks opening the panel that U.S.-China relations often seem to have shrunk to the internet issue, which now subsumes all other matters of concern to the two nations: free speech, religion, defense, business deals, and more—perhaps most strikingly clear in Hillary Clinton's "China and the internet" speech last January. Yet China is certainly not the only country to monitor and control its citizens' web use, as the ensuing discussion emphasized.

Taking the session's title under consideration, Rob Gifford began by meditating on how new media has challenged the Chinese government's "old dilemma"—namely, how to control its population. He pointed out that the source and direction of discourse in Chinese society have both undergone a fundamental change as a result of rising internet use in China. The government no longer stands as a single voice at the top, with a controlled message directed toward the country's population; instead, everyone is talking to everyone else in a cacophony of sound that might obscure the fact that, as Gifford wryly stated, the majority of people are saying "nothing." He views most users as primarily concerned with the internet's potential to entertain and divert them, and only a small number of Chinese netizens as interested in using it as a tool to foment popular discontent. When the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Gifford argued, most Chinese people "were too busy shopping to stroll for revolution." Yet he did not discount the tremendous impact that access to the web and the information available on it has had on people at all levels of Chinese society, and concluded by noting that in its ever-increasing control of the internet, the Chinese Communist Party is revealing a nervousness that hints at just how limited and uncertain its vision for the future really is.

Ananth Krishnan placed Chinese internet restrictions within a comparative context, drawing parallels between protests in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region in 2009 and the Indian-administered state of Kashmir in 2010. Both protests, Krishnan argued, showed that the internet had become a tool used by dissatisfied youth, but it was a tool that could only prove effective to a certain extent. While the Chinese government's decision to "turn off" the internet in Xinjiang for several months caused consternation both within and, especially, beyond the country, India's shutdown of websites related to the Kashmir protests resulted in little public discussion. Krishnan concluded with the observation that in both India and China, there is a lack of legal framework for dealing with online activism and the "crimes" related to it, so the governments of the two countries prosecute cyber activists under other statutes (Schell added that in China, Mao-era counterrevolutionary laws have been repackaged into state subversion laws and used to prosecute figures such as Liu Xiaobo, the currently imprisoned 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner).

As Angilee Shah emphasized, however, in some countries the government does not need to intervene directly into the cyber world—citizens themselves restrict their own online outspokenness. She pointed to Singapore, where the culture of self-censorship has spread so pervasively that the government finds blacking out websites unnecessary. Despite this, however, some younger web users are increasingly using new media to subtly circumvent the government's restrictions on what they can say; if and when that becomes a more widespread phenomenon, government leaders will find themselves in need of a new approach to online activism.

Andrew Lih returned to China in his presentation, discussing the tensions within the government's attitude toward the internet and the technology world more generally: while China would like to move up the high-tech value chain and increase its presence in research and development, it also wants to control how people use that technology and what happens when they do. Continuing on this theme of balance, Lih pointed out the compromises the Chinese government has made in its treatment of internet use—permitting, for example, the existence of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) that enable web users to access blocked websites. As long as the number of people using VPNs remains on a small scale, the government has seen little need to clamp down on their circumvention of its internet restrictions. In the aggregate, the Chinese government still accomplishes its goal of restricting widespread public discourse, proving, as Lih stated, that "you don't need **perfect** censorship to have **effective** censorship."

With their presentations concluded, the panelists embarked on a discussion with each other and with the audience that brought in considerations of other locales while focusing on internet issues in China. Rob Gifford argued that while in recent months the Western media has frequently debated the prospects for a Jasmine Revolution in China, the country's "hopelessness rate" is quite low—reinforcing a comment he had made earlier in the session, that in China today a lot of people have the dream of a better life, or at least the ability to imagine that dream—and there is far less frustration among young urban Chinese than there was among the young urban Egyptians who filled Tahrir Square. One audience member proposed that in China, we might see a model for economic growth without internet freedom, contrary to the expectations of all who celebrated the world wide web as a worldwide force for democracy. Krishnan reminded attendees that China has defeated almost every prediction made (about the pace of its economic development, the stability of its political system, etc.) for the past decade or more, and the country shows no signs of slowing down. Though there are certainly people speaking out against the increasing restrictions that the Chinese government has been implementing out since January, it remains to be seen how the situation will play out. As befits a "Late-Breaking News" panel, the speakers had no definitive conclusions or solutions to offer, but simply ended with a logical piece of advice for the audience: stay tuned.

Tags: Association for Asian Studies