Beijing prevented access to the Internet's Google search engine in the autumn, and now access to some online journals is being blocked. Such interruptions are part of the complex way the authorities are using policy and technology to attempt to guide the development of the Internet, our commentators write

POLITICS ONLINE | **SHANTHI KALATHIL and TAYLOR BOAS**

The Net will follow, not lead, China's reforms

Most followers of international affairs are now familiar with assertions about the potential of the Internet to change China drastically. Access has grown exponentially since the country's first connection to the Internet in 1993. Domains and Web sites have proliferated, while growing millions access the Internet from personal computers at home and the office. In major cities, Internet cafes host a generation accustomed more to mobile phones and consumerism than to communist dogma.

Chinese Internet companies seek and attain listings on US stock markets, and foreign investors hail China's entry to the World Trade Organisation. Beijing's municipal government boasts a Web site where citizens can e-mail their mayor with grievances.

Jiang Zemin, the leader who presided over much of this transformation, has spoken glowingly of ''a borderless information space around the world''.

Yet, tugging at the rhetoric is another reality. China's own information space is restricted by regulations inherited from pre-reform years. Its expansion is driven by five-year plans. Even as the so-called wired elite mushrooms and gains influence, growing numbers are arrested for expressing anti-government views online.

Falun Gong followers who use the Internet to spread information are sent to re-education camps. Meanwhile, millions outside China's urban centres still lack telephones, much less Internet access.

Clearly, the hype over China's experience with the Internet belies a far more complicated scenario, one that does not lend itself easily to pat characterisations of political impact. A number of international observers have suggested that the technology poses a potent threat to China's political system, that a tide of forbidden images and ideas will simply sweep away half a century of outmoded thinking. Others believe that the Internet will become a tool of the Chinese regime, which will use increasingly powerful monitoring and surveillance technologies to stay one step ahead of the democracy-seeking masses.

The truth is considerably more complex than either extreme. Even as competing sources of information broaden the public sphere of debate, the Chinese government has pursued a number of measures – from blocking Web sites to more punitive deterrents – designed to shape the physical and symbolic environments in which Internet use takes place. The state is also vigorously encouraging Internet-driven development, harnessing the Internet for specific political and economic aims.

China has sought to use information technology, in particular the Internet, to address such high-level issues as corruption, transparency, local government reform and the development of poor areas. It has incorporated concepts of information-age warfare into its rethinking of military affairs. China has also looked abroad for guidance on how to balance the promotion of information technology with authoritarian political control.

Through measures ranging from blunt punitive actions to the subtle manipulation of the private sector, the Chinese state has been largely successful to date in guiding the broad political impact of Internet use. This should not be confused with overt central control over every facet of the Internet.

Many analysts accurately note that the Chinese state is increasingly fragmented and unable to monitor the Internet in its entirety; that bureaucratic battles plague the medium's development; and that access to forbidden information has become much easier as the technology has spread. While valid, these points do not necessarily challenge the assertion that the state is effectively controlling the over-arching political impact of the Internet.

In the realm of civil society, the central government has largely been able to shape the environment in which Internet use takes place. It does this mainly by encouraging a level of self-censorship that still allows access to a plethora of information on the Internet. By offering some pre-emptive liberalisation, the government may also head off more serious challenges in the future.

In the economic arena, the government has shown that its ability to impose dictates on domestic and foreign companies extends well into the Internet sector, despite a proliferation of private companies that provide access and content to the public. At the same time, the government is harnessing the Internet to strengthen the state through anti-corruption and e-government measures. It is also using the Internet to influence global perceptions of China and its policies.

This is not to say that the government's ability to manipulate the political implications of Internet use is perfectly sustainable over the long term. The realm of public use features a growing potential for political impact.

One Internet entrepreneur has predicted that in five years China will have 300 million Internet devices, including cell phones and computers. Although such estimates may be high, it is true that Internet access will continue to expand considerably, with the state's blessing, in the coming years. By wholeheartedly endorsing a market-led model of Internet development and by encouraging mass access, the state faces the increased probability of political challenges stemming from Internet use.

In fact, much of the Internet use most challenging to the state has taken place during times of crisis, such as the incident in April 2001 when a US navy spy plane collided with a PLA jet fighter. Heated anti-American sentiment, which reached a crescendo after the terrorist attack on America, still simmers in many Web forums.

As analyst Nina Hachigian argues, during a crisis, the Internet may refocus national discontent in unprecedented ways. An unforeseen international incident, for instance, might precipitate a groundswell of public discontent that could mesh online with overseas Chinese nationalist sentiment, creating a potent challenge to the regime.

In such an instance, the Chinese authorities appear to have two choices: responding harshly, setting off a chain of repercussions, or shifting to a more hardline foreign policy in order to accommodate an increasingly agitated populace.

The increasing openness and competition promoted by China's entry to the World Trade Organisation may also shape the Internet's political impact. As China's transition to a market economy encourages bureaucracies to fight for lucrative pieces of turf, the Internet has proved to be an irresistible lure. But such battles do not facilitate effective centralised co-ordination and supervision. This presents one of the biggest challenges to the Chinese government: ensuring that Internet development takes place according to centrally crafted timetables and blueprints.

In essence, the Internet's development in China is taking place against a highly fluid backdrop. Various forms of Internet use may erode authoritarian control in a number of ways.

The public use of the medium, especially as it evolves, may prove to be, if not a catalyst, then a point of inflection along the road to concrete political change. Yet this change may not necessarily be of a democratic nature.

Should popular nationalistic sentiment coalesce on the Internet into significant opposition movement, the consequences may not bode well for stability or liberalisation.

The idea of a wired populace spontaneously pressing for democracy tends to appeal to Western policymakers. Yet Internet use that strengthens state capacity may contribute more to long-term liberalisation than Internet use that weakens the state in certain areas. Current e-government measures designed to increase transparency and promote efficiency may in fact gird the capacity of state institutions to weather a future political transition.

On its own, Internet use is unlikely to bring in a new political age in China. Concrete political change is likely to depend on several slow, incremental steps, many of which may have no connection to the Internet. At the same time, it is possible that Internet use may set the stage for gradual liberalisation, facilitating a future transition from authoritarian rule. All told, the Internet is likely to contribute to change within China without precipitating the state's collapse.

Excerpted from the book, Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, www.ceip.org. Reprinted by permission of the publisher

FILTERING TECHNOLOGY | **BENJAMIN EDELMAN**

Blocked sites will return, but with limited access

Internet users in China began reporting two weeks ago that they could no longer access the popular Web site Blogspot.com.

Blogspot's personal Web sites, or ''blogs'', are as notable for what they are as for what they are not: Blogspot features an eclectic mix of users' journals interspersed with offbeat links from around the Web. Only a handful of Blogspot's million-odd sites offer content likely to raise a censor's ire, so when China blocked Blogspot on January 10 – in its entirety and without warning or explanation – Internet users were bewildered.

With Jonathan Zittrain of the Harvard Law School, I have spent much of the past year tracking tens of thousands of sites blocked by China. Our work has shown that Chinese filtering bars access to a wide spectrum of sites – blocking controversial sites that openly criticise government policies, but also blocking sites that to us seem unobjectionable.

We have found blocking of research universities, health guides and even tourist brochures. While some blocks come and go, others remain in effect for months or longer. Often, those who run affected sites are unaware they are being blocked, as network operators in China are not obliged to tell them, and Chinese users lack an effective means of reporting the problem. Given this reality, I feared Blogspot would be blocked silently and permanently, like many thousands of sites before it.

But Blogspot's staff took action. They encouraged their many users to describe the situation on their blogs, and an online uproar resulted. International media covered the story, running headlines like ''China Blocks Bloggers Worldwide''.

Online discussion rivalled the furore of the 10 days in September when China blocked Google. As it turned out, Blogspot acted first, moving its servers to a new Internet address. Thus far, China has not taken steps to block the new address.

So, after roughly a week of blockage, Blogspot content again became accessible – most of it, at least. But some user sites remain out of reach in China.

Among Blogspot sites still blocked is one called Dynaweb, operated by an American company called Dynamic Internet Technology, which helps Chinese users bypass filtering. Dynaweb's Blogspot site provides the addresses of computers worldwide that can help circumvent China's filtering efforts.

To bar users' access to this information, China continues to silently block the Dynaweb site, thereby making retrieval of the necessary instructions impossible. And among Blogspot's million other user sites, many others may be blocked too, perhaps including Blogspot's most controversial political sites.

When and if site operators learn they are blocked, will anyone hear their calls for assistance? Or will the world continue business as usual, content that the bulk of Blogspot is again accessible?

The blocking of Dynaweb, but not the rest of Blogspot, reflects China's relatively recent implementation of filtering systems that more specifically target the content to be blocked. Years ago, China's filtering could operate only at the level of a server's IP address. Under that system, whenever Chinese censors objected to content on a given Web page, they had to block all the content on that page's server, even if the server hosted thousands or millions of other pages. But China's filtering toolkit now includes new abilities: China can block pages that contain controversial keywords, or searches that use those keywords.

These new filtering abilities alter the balance between Chinese censors and users. China's traditional filtering methods were bound to provoke outrage since they led to over-blocking of popular Web sites. But China's more focused blocking may not elicit indignation or even notice. ''China blocks 100 dissident Web sites'' is a far less incendiary headline than ''China blocks one million blogs''.

My concern here is more than speculative, for China's recent treatment of Google perfectly demonstrates the danger of focused blocking. When China restored access to Google after 10 days of complete blocking in September, the new Google differed from the old.

As accessed from China, the new Google lacks the ability to search controversial terms such as the names of Chinese political leaders. Searches using such terms yield no results, and sometimes also cause a ''timeout'' of up to 30 minutes, during which the user's Internet connection ceases to function.

Notwithstanding this problem and others, international headlines trumpeted ''Google restored to China'', and there is no sign that Google, or anyone else, cares to pursue the issue any further. It seems that Google, a business that seeks access to the Chinese market, considers ''mostly not blocked'' to be good enough. But for Chinese users seeking impartial information about their political leaders, the new Google borders on useless.

As the battle continues between user and censor, I believe the censor has the better of it. In the short run, China's filtering remains error-prone and imprecise, so analysts have plenty to criticise. But in the long run, those who seek to censor online content hold the most important cards; not only can they secretly monitor users' behaviour, they can search for circumvention systems and implement filtering that daily becomes more sophisticated, threatening, and punitive. The return of Blogspot may therefore be a victory only in the most immediate sense.

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CHINA'S BLOGGERS | **FRANK YU**

Most Web logs are created by hobbyists, not activists

Since Web log services allow almost anyone to post news and comments on a Web site as easily as writing e-mail, bloggers serve as an alternate, but amateur, media source.

The accessibility of Web logs and the speed at which they can be updated are their strong points as well as features that can be perceived by governments as threatening. And most threatening of all, bloggers swarm like a frenzied hive to topics and issues that can alter Google rankings or draw the attention of traditional media.

China's information wall serves two purposes. It blocks sensitive news from entering China as well as certain news coming from within China. What many critics argue against is not the right for the country to block information, but what many feel is an arbitrary and clumsy way of blocking both constructive as well as critical information about China. The blocking of the Blogspot site affected servers based in the US, and made it difficult for bloggers within China to post and for Web surfers there to read the sites. Many of the widely known China-related blogs are in English, posted by foreigners living on the mainland. As foreigners, many of these bloggers are semi-protected. Chinese nationals who blog are more underground, posting to secret sites or on chat boards and bulletin boards.

Who are the English-language bloggers in China anyway? Many are English-language teachers such as John Pasden, who maintains his blog www.sinosplice.com, about life in China and the trials and tribulation of living in one of the fastest-changing countries on Earth.

If anything, many of the people who write blogs about China do so out of a passion to share their interest in the culture and people of China with the rest of the world. Yes, they write about the negative as well as the positive, but most of all they write about what life is really like in China, in an effort to go beyond the official government statistics.

If the government is concerned that blogs may one day become a platform for fringe apocalyptic groups or scam artists, the argument has some validity, given that these groups exist in China and elsewhere.

But in this case, the medicine – tight control of information – is worse than the illness. With almost 59 million Internet users and more logging on each day, China will become the largest online nation in a few years. With an information-hungry population of that size, news does not have to be pushed in: it will be pulled in.

Trying to keep news out of China is like trying to plug leaks with a sponge; it will work for a while but the information will just seep in eventually, if only in smaller amounts.

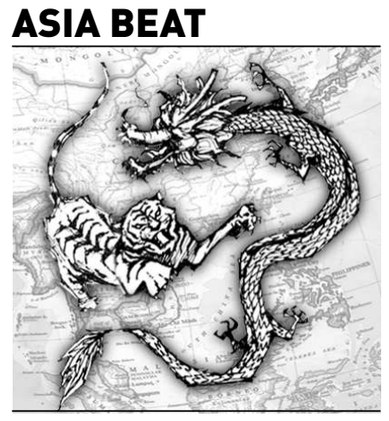
As China slowly transforms from a smokestack economy to an information-based economy, the need for the free flow of information will eventually necessitate the loosening of news control, as has happened in other modernising countries in East Asia.

So who really gets hurt by China's block on Web logs? Mr Pasden sums it up well in his blog from January 12: ''The sad thing is, though, that most of these blogs are by foreigners living in China, dedicated to changing the way outsiders think of China.

''We're out here building bridges, creating windows. And they're getting torn down and smashed by the government of the very country we're trying to benefit.''

Frank Yu is webmaster of brandrecon.com

ASIA BEAT



TOKYO
Jonathan Watts

Tobacco divide

A curious but immensely significant battle is being waged on the streets of central Tokyo between the light-ups and the stub-outs on either side of the great tobacco divide.

In a small step towards extinguishing Japan's reputation as a nicotine addict's paradise, smoking was banned on the streets of Chiyoda ward late last year. But now the vast, government-backed cigarette industry is fighting back.

Under the new regimen, tobacco-addicted salarymen were given a month to adjust their habits before the imposition of a fine of up to 20,000 yen (HK$1,322) for lighting up near stations and in other crowded areas.

The ban has taken effect in the government and business district next to the Imperial Palace, where commuters are more used to being given free packets of cigarettes by mini-skirted girls working on promotional campaigns for tobacco firms.

Instead, smokers have been confronted by about 50 uniformed patrol officers bearing ashtrays, in which smokers were instructed to stub out their cigarettes. Ryosuke Numata, a Chiyoda ward spokesman, said the radical step was necessary because bystanders, especially children, were at risk of being burned by cigarettes.

It is a peculiar argument, as the area probably attracts one of the lowest proportions of children in Tokyo. But it nevertheless represents a dramatic move in Japan, where the Finance Ministry – a 67 per cent stakeholder in Japan Tobacco, the world's third-biggest cigarette maker – is legally obliged to promote smoking.

Japan has lower cigarette taxes and fewer restrictions on advertising and sales to minors than almost any other developed nation.

A quarter of high school students smoke. Although it is illegal for children to buy cigarettes, they can pick up a packet of 20 for about HK$16 with no questions asked from any of the hundreds of thousands of vending machines on city streets.

According to the World Health Organisation, one in nine deaths in Japan is the result of smoking-related illnesses.

However, the only warning on cigarette packets is a notice in small print: ''Try not to smoke too much as there is a risk that it might damage your health. And be sure to observe smokers' etiquette.''

Now Japan Tobacco is making what it calls a bid to protect the rights of cigarette-lovers: it has provided mobile smoking areas – vans that drive through the district and stop to allow nicotine-dependent pedestrians to satisfy their cravings without fear or penalty.

Whether the stub-out squads of the ward office or the light-up vans of the giant monopoly will win remains to be seen. But if this central part of the capital falls, the tobacco industry appears to fear that it could lose the bigger battle for the hearts and minds – not to mention the lungs – of the nation.

WASHINGTON
Jim Wolf

Currying favour

The Bush administration has toned down its public displays of support for Taiwan as it seeks the mainland's help in dealing with Iraq and North Korea. At the same time, US President George W. Bush has declined to impose quotas in the first case brought against Beijing under rules that took effect following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation.

In a January 17 memorandum for US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Mr Bush said that providing import relief for US makers of electromechanical devices called pedestal actuators would not be in the national economic interest. The devices are mainly used in small vehicles for the disabled and electric wheelchairs.

Mr Bush has altered his stance on Taiwan ahead of the second annual US-Taiwan defence conference, organised by the US-Taiwan Business Council, a private group aimed at fostering bilateral trade.

Last March, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz met Taiwan Defence Minister Tang Yiau-ming at the first such conference – the highest-level US-Taiwan defence talks in 22 years. Mr Wolfowitz said in Florida that the US was prepared to help train Taiwan's military as part of doing ''whatever it takes'' to defend the island.

''We are eager to help,'' he said at the time, drawing a rebuke from Beijing.

The second conference is to take place between February 12 and 14 in San Antonio, Texas. Taiwan's team will be led by Chen Chao-min, a vice-minister for national defence who is the island's top arms purchaser. The Bush administration is likely to be represented by Peter Rodman, the assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, or Richard Lawless, the deputy assistant secretary of defence for the region.

In a move that may have heartened Beijing, Mr Bush's aides spurned a request from Mr Chen to hold talks in Washington after wrapping up the San Antonio meeting. The US did not want to stage a mere photo-taking session, Pentagon officials said.

The rejection came amid US pique over erroneous reports in the Taiwan press suggesting that US forces would take part in military exercises in Taiwan this spring for the first time since they pulled out in 1979. In fact, the US would merely observe the drill, nothing more than in past years, US officials said.