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The Internet and the Sociopolitical Development of Nation-States

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the Internet has revolutionized the spread of information across the world. Much like the printing press of the Renaissance, the Internet has enabled access to a wealth of ideas and facilitated infinitely greater communication for millions of people. As Benedict Anderson has argued, Gutenberg's press and the ideas it helped to spread played a major role in establishing the many national identities of Europe, and eventually today's modern nation-states, out of the ashes of the Roman Catholic–dominated Middle Ages. Twenty-one years since the launch of the World Wide Web, the Internet is already starting to have a similarly dramatic effect. In the West, the Internet has made social activity and research far easier than ever before possible. Elsewhere in the world, the effect is even greater. In China, the Internet is playing a major role in rapid commercialization and industrialization, while social networks are giving citizens an increasingly prominent voice against an authoritarian regime, undermining the constant pressure of strict government censorship and propaganda. In India, rapidly expanding mobile networks are connecting hundreds of millions in remote areas to each other and to government officials, ensuring the effectiveness of the bureaucracy and the endurance of the world's largest democracy.

Printing Press: Primary Weapon of the Revolutionary Arsenal

Anderson explores the immediate impact of Gutenberg's press and its subsequent effects on the role of language in European society and power structures in Chapters Two and Three of his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, entitled "Cultural Roots" and "The Origins of National Consciousness," respectively. Johannes Gutenberg first completed his eponymous bible during the 1450s, and between then and the close of the fifteenth century, around 20,000,000 volumes were printed throughout Europe, with presses operating in over 110 towns throughout Europe by 1480, particularly in what are now Italy and Germany (Febvre and Martin 186). During the subsequent sixteenth century, an estimated 150,000,000 to 200,000,000 more volumes were published throughout Europe (Febvre

and Martin 262). Needless to say, over this 150-year period, print media became a ubiquitous aspect of European society, with publishers establishing a market early on, and eventually expanding it to include the virtual entirety of Europe's increasingly literate populace.

Initially, this market only included those who could read Latin, then the primary language of written text in Europe, as it was (and still is) the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. But as this small market composed entirely of polyglots rapidly became saturated, publishers looked to broaden their market, producing content throughout Europe in local vernaculars for the monoglot majority (Anderson 38). The effect of this on society was twofold. First, the widespread distribution of printed media in a variety of languages led to the standardization and consolidation of printed language. Numerous similar dialects across Europe became consolidated into standard printed versions for the sake of convenience and versatility. For example, content printed in High German was distributed across an area populated by people that spoke a large number of adequately similar "lesser" dialects, such as the northwestern Platt Deutsch (Anderson 45). Other neighboring vernaculars, such as Bohemian Czech, were ultimately not quite similar enough to High German to be included under its umbrella by publishers, leading to the development of a distinct printed Czech language (Anderson 45). Similar examples could be found elsewhere in Europe, including in Britain, where dialects from the midlands and north of England fell under the umbrella of King's English from the south, whereas Welsh and Gaelic remained distinct. As these language barriers became more established, the idea that Europe was divided along these lines into a few larger nations, as opposed to countless smaller regions, gradually gained widespread support, leading commoners to eventually identify with certain nationalities over others.

Second, the increased variety of content and the greater number of languages in which that content was available facilitated the free spread of information to the masses in a way never before possible. Until the rise of print media, all information of any consequence, terrestrial or celestial, was tightly controlled by the Catholic Church, which controlled its dissemination through its own channels. All church documents and bibles were written entirely in archaic Latin, making them inaccessible to virtually everyone outside the clergy, allowing the Church to suppress all interpretations of sacred texts other than its own (Anderson 39). As such, when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, it was one of the very first documents of any religious significance to be published in any commonly

understood language, in this case German. Luther's German version of his Theses (the copy on the church door was in Latin) was widely distributed throughout Germany, and according to accounts from the time, they had "within 15 days [been] seen in every part of the country" (Febvre and Martin 289–90). The Reformation ultimately owed its success to Luther's star power as a writer. Between 1518 and 1525, Luther's works accounted for one-third of all books sold in German. Between 1522 and 1546, Luther published 430 editions of Biblical translations (Febvre and Martin 291–95). As such, Luther's commercial success and prolificacy made him into history's first bestselling author.

In short, the print medium gradually weathered away at the domineering influence of the Church, first by ending its monopoly on the distribution of information, and then by spreading information contrary to Church dogma. Eventually, national identities were forged at the expense of religious ones. This led to the consolidation of political power around secular authorities, further undermining the Church's influence in political matters. From there on, the print medium only grew in influence, continuing to spread revolutionary ideas worldwide. Without the printing press, William of Orange's *Declaration of the Hague* and *The Declaration of the Rights of Man* would never have been distributed, the Glorious and French Revolutions, respectively, might have never occurred, and popular sovereignty arguably would not have developed in Britain, France, or anywhere else.

World Wide Web: Printing Press of the Digital Age

At this point we can fast forward several hundred years to 1991, where Tim Berners-Lee, an English computer scientist was working to develop the World Wide Web on the campus of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), located on the border between France and Switzerland (Kottke.org 2012). Computer-based information networks, now commonly referred to as the "Internet," have existed in various forms since the 1960s, originally commissioned by the United States government for commercial and military interests. Berners-Lee's World Wide Web was intended to be a distribution medium for hypertext documents, or web pages. When users open their web browsers and log onto the web, they're greeted with a web page, which usually contain clickable text links, or hypertext, and if clicked upon will bring the user to another web page with more text links. The World Wide Web, as envisioned by Berners-Lee, is an interconnected network, or "web," of such pages, theoretically containing the collective knowledge of all of humanity, in a format that is readily accessible to anyone

anywhere, and relatively lightweight (accessible on a computer or a mobile device, as opposed to a physical library containing thousands or millions of cumbersome printed volumes).

On August 6, 1991, Berners-Lee posted the first web page, a basic explanation of the World Wide Web project and instructions on how to use a web browser and set up a web server, at the address info.cern.ch (Tim Berners-Lee 1991). On April 30, 1993, CERN announced that the basic foundations of the World Wide Web would be released into the public domain on a royalty-free basis, ensuring the free and widespread growth and development of the Web by both corporate and individual actors (CERN 2003).

In a sense, Tim Berners-Lee is like a modern Johannes Gutenberg, and the World Wide Web is his modern-day printing press. Similarly, Gutenberg used his press almost exclusively to print bibles, while Berners-Lee's initial web pages were purely informational, providing information mostly about CERN and the World Wide Web project. Eventually, as time passed and other innovators rose to prominence, the printing press reached its full potential, ultimately being used constantly to publish countless books and periodicals worldwide. Likewise, CERN's release of the World Wide Web into the public domain opened it up to public innovation in a similar manner. As a result, the Internet of today facilitates the spread of information for research purposes, as it was originally intended, as well as social activity between individuals, as evidenced by the rise of social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter.

The Web in the Western World: So Ubiquitous, It's a Human Right!

In the Western world, the ability of users to access the Internet is largely unrestricted and exploited to near full potential. Individuals can and regularly do use the Web to communicate with each other (social networks have made it infinitely easier to send messages, images, videos, etc., to friends anywhere), keep up with the current events of the day (many newspapers and press organizations post their content online in some form, in addition to any print or broadcast editions), and perform scholarly research (much of this paper was researched using online source material). Similarly, corporations use this technology to provide important product information to existing customers and gauge interest among potential future consumers, while elected officials and government agencies do the same for their constituents. Internet access has become so ubiquitous over the past two decades that a 2011 United Nations Human Rights Council report declared uninterrupted Internet access to be a human right, calling "upon all States to ensure that Internet access is maintained at all times, including during times of political unrest"

(United Nations General Assembly 21). In another example, the government of Finland has taken this logic one step further, declaring in 2010 that broadband Internet access is a legal right for all citizens, and promising to provide connections nationwide by 2015 (Finland makes broadband a "legal right," 2010).

The Web in China: Opening Pandora's Box in a Socialist Vacuum

While citizens of the industrialized states of Western Europe and the Anglosphere now enjoy abundant and relatively unrestricted access, the Internet's current potential is rapidly being realized elsewhere in the world. As two of the world's fastest growing economic and political powers, China and India are at the forefront of this online boom.

Currently, China has one of the world's fastest growing online presences. According to the China Information Network Information Center's (CNNIC) January 2012 Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, 513,000,000 people in China, or 38.3% of the total population, were online, an increase of 55,800,000, or 12%, from the year prior (CNNIC 4). By comparison, in 2004, there were 204,000,000 users in the United States in 2004, or about 75% of the population then (Nielsen/NetRatings 1). Additionally, 73.4% of Chinese Internet users access the web on desktop computers, while 69.3% access the web on mobile devices (CNNIC 2012 4). Of all home computer users, 392,000,000, or 98.9%, have broadband connections (CNNIC 2012 4), meaning that high-speed access is well within the reach of China's growing middle class. Furthermore, 136,000,000, or 26.5% of all Chinese Internet users are located in rural areas, an increase of 11,130,000, or 8.9% over the year before (CNNIC 2012 4), suggesting slower, but still significant growth outside China's bustling metropolises.

Politically, China is an authoritarian one-party state under the control of the Communist Party of China (CCP), and has been since 1949. As such, the government has consistently sought to carefully measure the Internet's level of penetration in China, so as to promote economic growth opportunities while also attempting to limit any potential for online antigovernment dissent. In 1993, the "Golden Bridge" project was introduced, aimed at modernizing China's telecommunications infrastructure (Lewis 5), which included a number of key Internet regulations first implemented in 1994, followed by the Internet's commercial launch in China in 1995 (Lewis 3).

Three main regulations govern China's Internet. The first is the Temporary Regulation for the Management of Computer Information Network International Connection, passed in 1996

and updated in 1997 (Qiu 10). The Temporary Regulation prohibits individual users from "establishing a direct international connection by themselves," requires all Internet service provider (ISPs) connections go through one of four networks, ChinaNet, GBNet, CERNet or CSTNet (Qiu 10), and mandates that all ISPs obtain government licenses (11). The second is the Ordinance for Security Protection of Computer Information Systems, which was issued by the State Council in 1994 to give the Ministry of Public Security the power to "supervise, inspect and guide" nationwide Internet security and prosecute any violations (Qiu 11). This regulation led to the introduction of a subsequent regulation in 1997, the Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protection and Management Regulation, which lists specific illegal online activity (Federation of American Scientists, New PRC Internet Regulation, 1998), including any use of the Internet intended to "overthrow the government or the socialist system" (Section 5, §2), disrupt national unity (Section 5, §3), "inciting hatred or discrimination among [minority] nationalities" (Section 5, §4), promoting superstition or vice (Section 5, §6), inciting terrorism, criminal activity or slander (Section 5, §7), or spreading any vaguely defined "falsehoods" or "rumors" (Section 5, §5). The third is State Council Order No. 292: Measures for Managing Internet Information Services, issued in September 2000, which set the first restrictions aimed directly at content providers, or providers of "Internet information services" (IIS) (China Culture, 2003, Measures, 2000). Specifically, IIS providers must be licensed and registered with the proper provincial authorities (Articles 7 and 8), are responsible for maintaining the legality of their content (Article 11), must record all user access data for at least 60 days and make those records available to any "relevant state authorities" upon request (Article 14), and further reinforce and apply the regulations set forth by the 1997 Management Regulation to IIS providers (Article 15).

As such, these regulations and ordinances ultimately give the Chinese government the technical and legal capability to monitor and censor Internet content and activity within its borders, define broadly what content and activity is illegal, and conduct fully unwarranted investigations related to any illegal activity and content. In short, the Chinese government theoretically has the ability to absolutely control the Internet within its borders to further its own political ends, entirely at the expense of the ideals of freedom and openness that the World Wide Web project has strived to promote. In China today, access to many websites is blocked sporadically or permanently, including social networks such as Facebook and Twitter,

informational websites such as Wikipedia, and foreign news outlets such as *The New York Times* and BBC News. Internet police can and do monitor the activity of individual users, and often remove subversive blog and forum posts at will.

Foreign Internet companies are similarly bound to state regulations in order to legally hold operations in China. Google attracted controversy in 2006 after launching google.cn, the Chinese local version of its search engine, which censored search results in accordance with Chinese law (Grossman 2006). For example, when a user does an image search for "Tiananmen" in google.com, the results mostly include pictures of the iconic tank man at the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy protests, but when a user does the same search at google.cn, the results include mostly official pictures of the square and the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Grossman 1). Google co-founder Larry Page responded to the controversy by admitting that filtering results compromises Google's mission and "Don't be evil" ethos to a degree, but "failing to offer Google search at all to a fifth of the world's population, however, does so far more severely" (Grossman 1). Google eventually stopped filtering its results in 2010, following cyberattacks that it traced to Chinese computers, possibly related to the government (China condemns decision by Google to lift censorship, 2010). Despite, or perhaps because of the blow to China's image caused by the fallout over Google, domestic Internet companies have managed to thrive in China, regardless of their greater compliance with government censorship standards. China's largest search engine, Baidu, still holds the bulk of China's search market (Jin 2011), despite Google's presence, while social networks Renren and Weibo are popular local alternatives to their banned foreign counterparts, Facebook and Twitter, respectively, despite heavy government monitoring.

Despite all of this, controversial user-generated content has appeared in China, and government censors have continually had to play catch-up to stop them. Numerous organizational websites and individual blogs promoting sensitive political topics, including democracy, the Falun Gong movement, Taiwanese independence, and anticorruption, have drawn the continued ire of the state. Paris-based nongovernmental organization Reporters Sans Frontières has referred to China as "the world's biggest prison for netizens," and London-based Amnesty International has noted that China "has the largest recorded number of imprisoned journalists and cyber-dissidents in the world" (Yu 2012). However, the government has not been

able to achieve the gargantuan task of wiping out all online dissent, and subversive content continues to emerge regularly.

In addition to controversial political content, the government has also attempted to crack down on what it perceives to be "sexually suggestive" content (Federation of American Scientists, New PRC Internet Regulation, Section 5, §6, 1998). As such, Internet pornography is banned in China in largely the same way that subversive political content is. Li Li, a Guangzhou based blogger writing under the pseudonym Muzi Mei, caused considerable controversy in 2003 when she started posting extensive and detailed accounts of her sex life. Li's blog became extremely popular in China, a country where public sexuality is seen as highly taboo, and Li became a national celebrity despite government attempts to censor her (Sex and the Single Chinese 1), so much so that she was the most searched entry on search engine Sohu.com, ahead of runner up Mao Zedong (Yardley 2003).

The case of Muzi Mei brings up two important issues related to the liberalization of media. First, her blog's success demonstrates the ability of new media to effect social change in addition to political change. Today's young Chinese are considerably more open about their sexuality then their parents, who were largely educated under the hard line suppression of the Cultural Revolution. According to sociologist Li Yinhe, 70% of Beijing residents admitted to having had premarital sex in 2005, compared to 15.5% in 1989 (Sex and the Single Chinese 2005, 1). While China's budding sexual revolution has had some growing pains, as evidenced by rising HIV infection rates and increased abortions among single mothers, increasingly widespread sexual knowledge will, in all likelihood, make Chinese society more able to effectively deal with sexual issues as a whole in the long run. Second, her blog also raises questions about the role of obscene and otherwise intellectually non-stimulating content in a free society, as the blog is still composed entirely of accounts of Li having sex, including a 25 minute long audio podcast of her orgasm noises that crashed its host server when 50,000 people attempted to download it simultaneously (Sex and the Single Chinese 1). Like the romance novels and Playboy magazines of the print medium, spam and porn have a ubiquitous presence on the Internet, with porn sites accounting for an estimated 30% of all online data transfer (Anthony 2012). While this content may be a nuisance for much of the online public, its existence does highlight the fact that in open societies, content producers are allowed the freedom to express whatever they please and content consumers can consume whatever they

please. Furthermore, producers and consumers have the responsibility to make that choice wisely, and if they didn't have that choice, their content would ultimately be considerably less effective in effecting any real social or political change. It's not ideal, but it's arguably better than having highly controlled content from limited sources. To quote Li, "I express my freedom through sex, it's my life, and I can do what I want" (Sex and the Single Chinese 1).

Currently, the Chinese government's approach to the Internet suggests a desire to maintain a strong and stable political order and a fairly conservative social order, while also promoting the country's sustained economic growth. In short, the government is attempting to clear a path of least resistance for China's future political and social advancement as it grows economically. Despite the strong historical links between sociopolitical liberalization and capitalist growth, it remains to be seen whether China's current model of Internet censorship will be sustainable. While the so-called Great Firewall of China certainly blocks a considerable amount of content, it also hasn't been able to keep up with all of the content, and as such, exists to some degree to intimidate rather than comprehensively censor. What is certain is that China's ability (or inability) and willingness (or lack thereof) to liberalize will ultimately have a great effect on its digital future, and vice versa.

The Web in India: A Brilliant Tool for Liberal Growth, Under Threat

To the immediate southwest of China is another one of the world's rapidly growing Internet markets, and a vastly different one at that. In India, the world's largest democracy, there are an estimated 121,000,000 Internet users, or 10.2% of the total population (Asia Internet Usage Stats, 2012), a massive online presence, albeit one with much smaller penetration than China's or the United States'. Additionally, only 2% of rural Indians have Internet connections (Vaidyanathan 2012). The quality of India's connections lag behind China's as well. Of that 10.2% online, only about 11% of them, or 13,350,000 have access to broadband connections (Indian Telecom Services, 4), as the growth of high-speed networks is currently hampered by the physical limitations of existing network infrastructures. However, India's online presence is growing rapidly, as the number of Internet users in China rose 25% in 2011 alone, and 59% of users access the Internet exclusively through mobile devices (Vaidyanathan 2012), of which there were 791,380,000 subscribers in February 2011 (India Telecom). Unlike China, individual connections are minimally regulated, and numerous private companies dominate the Internet market alongside a few state owned enterprises.

The Indian government has aggressively sought to expand access in several ways. First, the government has proposed setting up a national fiber optic network (NOFN) to provide telecommunications links to every village in India by 2014, an estimated ₹20,000 *crore* ($3,807,200,000 US) investment. According to Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) CMD R.K. Upadhyaya, the NOFM "would help in offering governing, banking and health and other basic services online up to the villages are rural areas" once created (Telecom Links in all Indian villages by 2014: BSNL, 2012). Second, the government and British tech company DataWind have recently collaborated to produce and sell the Aakash, an inexpensive tablet computer running Google's Android operating system aimed largely at students (Magder 2012). After an initial pilot run of 100,000 free units, the Aakash will be sold to students for $35 apiece, with a commercial version called UbiSlate 7+ retailing for $60 (Magder 2012). DataWind CEO Suneet Tuli has described the Aakash as not quite living up to Apple's ubiquitous iPad in terms of quality, but argued that "if [it's] one of your first tablet experiences, you'll be impressed," adding "The iPad customer isn't our customer—but you can buy about 15 of these for the price of one of those" (Magder 2012). Telecoms and Education Minister Kapil Sibal stated, "The rich have access to the digital world; the poor and ordinary have been excluded. Aakash will end that digital divide" (Magder 2012). Third, India is already a major information technology hub, as much of the population speaks English, giving it a major advantage in a world where the most consistent Internet access exists in North America and Western Europe, especially in the Anglosphere. Eventually, these efforts and many others will likely facilitate the expansion of Indian Internet access through free capitalist growth.

Despite India's strong democratic tradition, the government does engage in some censorship activity under the guise of security, censoring content that the government believes could incite violence, especially anything related to the ongoing dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir (ONI Country Profile 300). However, journalists are rarely detained, and are usually released quickly when they are (ONI Country Profile 300). Censorship and monitoring efforts have increased considerably since the 2008 bombings in Mumbai (Internet Enemies Report 7), whereas before that, such measures were rare. Furthermore, according to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2011 report, bloggers and moderators can face "libel suits and even criminal prosecution for comments posted by others on their websites" (Freedom on the Net 170). Additionally, communications interceptions can be conducted without prior judicial approval,

and all ISPs are required to allow authorities access to user data (Freedom on the Net 2011 171), effectively allowing unwarranted online surveillance.

While this illiberal surveillance is quite unfortunate, it is not nearly as comprehensive or invasive as China's online censorship, and has not had nearly as detrimental an effect on free expression. It's also worth noting that similarly illiberal laws and bills have emerged in older, more established democracies, including the United States and Canada. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, passed shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, vastly expanded government surveillance powers online, requiring ISPs to provide detailed individual usage and financial data for subpoenas (USA PATRIOT ACT: H.R. 3162, Public Law 107-56, Title II, Sec. 210), for instance. The Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) sought to inefficiently punish and block websites for hosting copyright infringing content posted by individual users (Stop Online Piracy Act: H.R. 3261, Title I, Sec. 102) before it was defeated in the U.S. House of Representatives, while Bill C-30, currently proposed in the Canadian House of Commons, would allow for "legal access," or unwarranted access by authorities of user data from ISPs and telephone providers, as well as a "back door" provision to allow easier communication interception at will (C-30, Summary). Even C-30's title, the "Protecting Children from Online Predators Act," serves to propagandize the bill, much like the Indian and U.S. governments have sought to propagandize the Mumbai bombings and the 9/11 attacks, respectively.

Despite all of this, however, India's efforts to expand quality Internet access nationwide generally serve to further promote liberal free expression. By extension, this would also promote further economic growth and the deepening of India's democracy. Unfortunately, as a democracy, India's government is susceptible to public paranoia, political opportunism and other undue influence that can threaten individual privacy rights and hold back a society commercially and creatively.

Conclusion: State and Society in the Digital Future

The rise of the Internet has had a tremendous effect in revolutionizing global communication over its two-decade existence, much like the printed volume it's rapidly replacing. The growth of both mediums has been driven largely by economic motivators, as well as political ones, as service providers, corporations and governments seek to cash in, much in the same way that publishers and early authors did during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, facilitating the rapid transfer of information and ideas on a level never before possible. In China,

the government has simultaneously sought to foster Internet growth for purposes of economic growth, while also seeking to strictly control content for political purposes. Whether China can maintain this balance in the long term remains to be seen, but what is certain is that the Internet has had a dramatic overall effect on Chinese government and society so far, and has served to somewhat liberalize society. In India, the government has sought to foster Internet growth for purposes related to both economic development and the expansion of democracy. While much of India is still not connected, and there have been some hiccups along the way in the area of user privacy, India's future as a major and open digital hub remains bright. Therefore, it can be assumed that the continued growth of the Internet worldwide, both in industrialized Western states and in the developing world, will only serve to further promote political, economic and social growth and change well into the future, much like printed volumes did in centuries past, all the way back to Gutenberg.

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