

DEMOCRACY & NEW MEDIA: A REFLECTION ON THE APPARATUS AND ITS ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY

Aaron Rao,

Lecturer
TMC Academy Singapore.

ABSTRACT

Theoretically, the Internet has a possibility of opening a new era for public cyber-space democracy on a local, national, and global scale. Yet there are various views on Internet's democratic potential. As a result of internet's free nature, internet censorship is minimalised. Unlike content censorship, internet censorship is utilised to filter vulgar languages, videos and images. Recent protests in Hong Kong illustrated a good example of democratic society. China's government-scale censorship on Internet is significantly different from western part of the world. Whilst internet censorship in western countries is focused on hated posts, pornography, and coarse language or name calling, Chinese internet censorship is mainly aimed for replacing western internet environment to their own. As the world becomes more globalised, it is becoming more challenging for Chinese government to persuade the need of Internet censorship to the public. The question lies in how much control a government should have, if any at all, over the internet.

Keywords: Democracy, New Media, Internet, Freedom.

INTRODUCTION:

Recent protests in Hong Kong illustrated a good example of democratic society. Hong Kong citizens have practiced a right to protest to the government. The Chinese government, to limit news to public, made Instagram and Facebook inaccessible for Chinese citizens to share photos of democracy protesters clashing with police in Hong Kong (Bloomberg, 2014). From what we can see from government action, politics these days are highly relevant to Internet media environment. The impact of an apparatus such as that of Twitter to a country's elections is increasing considerably as well. Theoretically, the Internet has a possibility of opening a new era for public cyber-space democracy on a local, national, and global scale. Yet there are various views on Internet's democratic potential. Urofsky (2001) stated 'the importance of constitutionalism, democratic elections, creation of law, and role of interest groups, public's right to know, protecting minority rights, and civilian control of the military in practice of democracy, along with role of a free media' (p.169). This shows the significance of internet freedom contributing to democracy. This paper attempts to briefly examine the importance of Internet freedom is to democracy in today's information age.

In its simplest explanation, the word "democracy" is derived from Greek word and it refers to 'rule by the people' (Landman, 2013). During ancient Greek time, philosophers of Greece attempted to build a healthy society which does not rely on realm's centralised power. By French revolution, people achieved a modern right to participate in democratic society's politics proactively. It is a foundation of a concept to sustain the development of modern society based on the majority society members' consensus. It has been acting as a principle of social agreement for dealing with societal different interests. The main principles of democracy consist of basic human rights, which are internationally agreed.

In a digital era we are living now, Internet is an important public sphere where opinions are discussed and spread to one another. According to Lax (2000), Internet is 'the new medium which has reenergized the debate about technology and democracy'. Internet freedom originates from free traits of Internet in which everyone can write and speak anytime and anywhere (Jones, 1997). Internet freedom mainly consists of freedom of speech and freedom of information. It is generally believed that everyone has the right to have their own belief, thus have a right to express what they think freely. Additionally, there is a right to seek various sources of information.

ICT (INTERNET COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY) AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRACY:

Herring (1993), mentioned four aspects of Internet (computer mediated communication) contribute to democracy which are accessibility, social context, the lack of use practices, and the absence of explicit censorship. First, accessibility refers to being able to access to the computer network to exchange information and ideas at a relatively low cost. Recently, celebrities and politicians use social media to voice out their opinions, and this is a good example of accessibility. Second, social context refers to being anonymous on the internet. On the internet, people can hide their real identity including age, sex, geographical location and Internet neutralise personal information such as appearance and accent. Whether to open their real identity to public or not depends on individuals' choice. Third, the lack of use practices means that people tend to reveal their opinions more honestly on the internet. Lastly, the absence of explicit censorship refers to the minimal censorship on the internet space.

As a result of internet' free nature, internet censorship is minimalised. Unlike content censorship, internet censorship is utilised to filter vulgar languages, videos and images. However, before posts are deleted, some people may have read it thus showing that there is still some freedom of speech. In my opinion, freedom of speech is limited when servers divide users according to their gender, age and stratification. In such circumstance, the way users communicate with each other will be more polite but will not be their sincere opinion. The four aspects of internet mentioned above showed how they contribute to the democracy.

China's government-scale censorship on Internet is significantly different from western part of the world. Whilst internet censorship in western countries is focused on hated posts, pornography, and coarse language or name calling, Chinese internet censorship is mainly aimed for replacing western

internet environment to their own. In western countries, there needs to be a reason to ban, but that is not the case in China (Bloomberg, 2014). According to Bloomberg (2014), Chinese government claims that Internet censorship is essential to fight terrorism. However, most public would not agree to this claim. In China, video streaming webpage YouTube and application market Google Play were banned by Chinese government until November 2014 when the ban was lifted (The Economic Times, 2014). Before the ban was lifted, Chinese citizens were deprived of their right to free access of information compared to the rest of the world.

Consequently, Chinese government allowed Chinese remarkably low level of Internet freedom at a point which may be thought of as an example of information inequality.

As the world becomes more globalised, it is becoming more challenging for Chinese government to persuade the need of Internet censorship to the public. According to Peking University professor Hu Yong (2014), ‘government should consider what the public wants’ (Bloomberg, 2014). As a result of the need of powerful government for economy development in centralised manner, Chinese government is still clinging on to ‘clean Internet campaign’. Chinese president Xi Jinping stated that ‘the development of the Internet has brought new challenges to national sovereignty, safety and interests’ (Bloomberg, 2014).

Overall, it can be said that internet freedom which consists of freedom of speech and freedom of information is a pre-assumption for a democratic society. To create a more democratic society, political information should be well educated and delivered to public. The techno-democracy would bring a more peaceful and equitable future to the world.

DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD OF THE INTERNET:

Regardless of the political structure of any nation, one could not potentially experience more exemplary democracy than with the use of the internet nowadays. Indeed, advancements in technology have enabled the exchange of information to be conducted in a matter of seconds and “clicks.” People from across the globe can both read about other countries or cities and share anything from their own whenever they want. Websites and search engines such as Google have empowered people with extensive knowledge and awareness of events beyond their respective communities. Furthermore, the internet has allowed people within the same community, city, or country to become unified in expressing common opinion.

In Europe, this sense of unification is acknowledged by the European Commission. It currently collaborates with a website run by the European Citizens’ Initiative, ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative, which enables “one million EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies” by negotiation with the commission “to make a legislative proposal” (Kirkhope, 2012). Other than that, transparency from some governments has been increased as they utilize the web to display public data, available for everyone concerned. When it comes to democracy, every individual has the right to access the web. It is undoubtedly just another product that a customer can purchase; similar to how food is bought from the supermarket. This is a clear and straightforward belief. The question lies in how much control a government should have, if any at all, over the internet. Some firm arguments of those believing in more government-control are the following: to prevent the spread of illegal material, to spare underage people from exposure to inappropriate content, and to uphold copyright laws. On the other hand, those against it believe that such control would do little to stop material like pornography from surfacing, while some say that it would turn the web into a business that continuously finds ways, such as content limitation and additional fees, to gain profits (BBC). The debate on this goes on to this very day.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH, THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY IN USING THE WEB:

The United Nations recognizes the power of the web by stating online that freedom of speech must apply to “all types of emerging media platforms which will definitely contribute to development, democracy and dialogue” (UNESCO). This power is also deemed a responsibility, and since 2006, UNESCO has conducted workshops in different Forum meetings to tackle issues on protecting users’

privacy and online ethics. Additionally, the U.S. government considers the freedom with internet usage “a foreign policy priority” and has partnered with more than twenty other governments in maintaining such freedom, as all are members of the *Freedom Online Coalition* (U.S. Department of State).

Social media has exponentially increased the popularity of free expression online. The speed of information dissemination yields the quickness of internet users to react and respond to what they have just heard or read. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been overwhelmed with “viral” topics that get incessantly posted as status messages or *tweets* by millions from time to time. Condolences and donations were offered to the Japanese earthquake victims, political debates went back and forth online during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 (Kirkhope, 2012), and impressions of vulnerability to violence surged after reported shootings and bombings occurred in the U.S. in 2012. Many comments and reactions catapulted by these platforms are not ones that the average user would say in person, but due to the sense of ‘safety’ perceived from typing behind a screen, one feels compelled to be rather blunt or extreme, especially if only one’s personal contacts are the recipients. Nevertheless, the fact that the one’s comments on social media rarely get one in trouble with the law is substantial proof that the internet is a pro-democracy tool for freedom of speech.

On the other hand, freedom of expression online does not exempt one from facing the social consequences from online delinquencies. Such a case happened to a Singaporean assistant teacher, Devina DeDiva, who was fired by her Filipino superiors (Aguila, 2013) after writing a series of comments on her Facebook account, degrading Miss World winner Megan Young and called Filipinos “*poor, smelly, and uneducated*” (see *Appendix A*). Did she exercise her legal freedom in doing this? Certainly. Did that mean that her decision to post those comments would not lead to consequences in her work and social life? Certainly not!

CENSORSHIP IN SILENCE:

Unfortunately, not all people live in purely democratic nations, if such a thing exist at all, and thus, governments of such nations make it a point to seize as much control of the internet as they can without appearing as though they are in a state of autocracy. This mirrors the government of People’s Republic of China. While not nearly under the same level as that of North Korea, a communist political system prevails in China, although the major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are allowed to relish the rewards of capitalistic practices. Of course, those cities are intended to thrive in an efficient economy grounded on democracy, as they are the very places most visited by tourists. However, at the heart of a country populated by over a billion people, there exists an environment strictly under the reins of its rulers, a world hardly exposed by mainstream media and masked by censorship.

This kind of censorship does not deal with the omission of foul language or sexually explicit material, but rather, a silencing of ideals. The Chinese government has reportedly taken measures to cover any gaps that could taint its reputation or stimulate rebellion by the people. Even though the official constitution states the right of citizens to freedom of speech and press, authorities are compelled by media regulations to “crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets” (Xu, 2014). Back in 2013, specific websites, including Wikipedia, were blocked during the period of controversy on June 4th, which was the anniversary of the massacre of protesters at Tiananmen Square. Even “controversial photos and search terms” that referred to the incident in subtle ways were downright banned (Xu, 2014). Sadly, even ethical and responsible journalism is restrained due to the fact that reporters are not allowed to dispel information obtained from press conferences via social media – the very platform created for freedom of speech – unless permitted by the head of their media organization (Xu, 2014).

On the receiving end, the Chinese unknowingly consume censored content online, which is maintained in two ways: the *Great Firewall*, starting in the 1990s, which allows them access to only a few foreign websites, and the *Golden Shield*, which was initiated in 1998 as “a system for domestic surveillance” by the Ministry of Public Security (E.H., 2013). The intended relationship between China’s government and people is summed up in this way: citizens may reap the benefits from “the social and commercial aspects of the internet,” but the government ensures that political activism remains

nonthreatening (E.H., 2013). Does such an ideal relationship preserve political stability? Yes. Does it exhibit true democracy? No.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY PREVAILS; INTERNET FREEDOM ENHANCES IT:

It can be said that democracy is an idea, an ideology, and a philosophy that has always and will continue to stand the test of time. Democracy was present during the 5th century in multiple cities in Greece. It was a condition of life sought after by the Chinese that fled their homeland during the oppressive rule of Mao Zedong. It was what enabled Martin Luther King to speak out against the ongoing prejudice towards African Americans and rally thousands of supporters during the Civil Rights Movement. It empowered women in Great Britain, and eventually all over the world, to go on strikes and demand equal pay for the labor they put as much time into as their male counterparts. It is the reason we can use Facebook and Twitter to both criticize and defend political or non-political figures without worrying about an arrest the following day. Democracy is here now and will be there in future.

The internet, however, has truly enhanced the ability of democracy to mass-influence. This ability was demonstrated during the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in October 2014. Rallying together for the utmost right of choosing their desired candidates for president without mediation by the Chinese government, students and adults alike utilized technology to make an outstanding impact in “Occupy Central,” leading to international awareness. Specifically, Joshua Wong, one of the leaders, had asked his countrymen via Facebook to download FireChat, an app that forms a “mesh network” through the capabilities of Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, during the protest as backup in the event one’s phone got disconnected. The app enabled the activists to maintain contact with one another, leading to statistical reports of “over 5.1 million chat sessions” and around “1.5 million tweets with the hashtag #OccupyCentral” within two days of the first week of the month (Smith, 2014). Indeed, Hong Kong’s capitalization on internet freedom led to putting up an impressive fight for true democracy.

As mentioned earlier, true democracy is a tool that works as a double-edged sword. It can be used to both help and harm users, communities, and possibly nations. Democracy must be exercised carefully, with respect for human rights and morality, to be helpful. The internet, therefore, must be used with caution because it can lead such democracy in either of the two directions. Responsibility comes with power.

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