ABSTRACT

An oft-stated view held by scholars and political observers is that given the unique characteristics of the Internet, the technology offers real opportunities for democratization and political transformation, especially in societies where the basic rights of freedom of expression and the press are constricted by state control. This thesis seeks to challenge this main assumption by examining the impact of the Internet along with the politics surrounding its use in Asia, with specific attention to the cases of China, Singapore and Iran. This thesis postulates that in the cases of certain authoritarian regimes such as China and Singapore, not only has the presence and use of the Internet failed to spawn strong opposition movements, but authorities in these states have cleverly entered the domain of online expression and have utilized the technology to improve governance and control of these societies. The conditions which make it possible for certain states to suppress online activism, and which in turn contributes to the strengthening of authorial control are then clearly identified and delineated. They include, namely: a strong regulatory regime; an effective use of e-governance and the pacification of Internet entrepreneurs. Iran serves as a contrast case to China and Singapore as civil society actors in the Islamic country have demonstrated a clear interest in participating in a struggle against the state by entering and articulating their positions in the virtual space of cyber interaction. The notable absence of stated conditions in Iran, however, clearly shows that a confluence of circumstances is still necessary for regimes to more fully manipulate online spaces. It is not the intention of the thesis to project the notion that China’s infamous “Firewall” is one-hundred percent full-proof or that citizens in these countries are deprived of all access to controversial news and media. The main conclusion that is drawn is that despite the government’s open promotion and dissemination of Internet technology, certain states have managed to strike a precarious balance by also maintaining control of the public agora.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I believe that behind every scholar, writer, artist or anyone who has dreamed of accomplishing something which required painstaking effort and delicate care is a team of people who strongly championed that individual’s cause. The persons acknowledged here serve as an important reminder that I was never really alone in my efforts and cannot accept sole credit for my accomplishments. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Yves Tiberghien, whose expertise, understanding and patience added considerably to the writing of this thesis. It is rare to encounter an individual with such a vast pool of knowledge and skill in so many different areas. His dedication to his research and scholastic curiosity were constant sources of inspiration. My gratitude goes out to Professor Brian Job, who is always ready to supply kind words of support and encouragement and Professor Kenneth Foster who shared my interest and passion for China’s political and societal developments and pressed me to think deeply about these issues. I must also acknowledge Professor Michael Lakatos, who had the courage to teach at the undergraduate level a course devoted entirely to the works of the late John Rawls. His brief sojourn at the university possibly changed my life forever; I signed up for the class hoping to diversify my political science credits and I finished the course with profoundly altered views on human rights and justice. And those who were burdened with the truly difficult task of shaping young minds during their formative years also deserve mention. I would not be where I am today without the encouragement of one highschool English teacher, Ms. Elizabeth Eisner, a fire of a lady who was the instigator of my passion for the opera, symphony and everything that is delicious and spectacular in the world of art and literature.

On a more personal note, my deepest gratitude goes out to my family and most especially my mom, who has guided me with unending love and devotion through the arduous and baffling process that is life. I am truly fortunate to have an ally who has never barred me from pursuing my goals – however unconventional and improbable. And last but certainly not least, Bryan’s unconditional love and support fuels my efforts. He is an intellectual powerhouse who is always challenging me to bend beyond my usual reach. I look forward to braving the next stage of our lives with such a remarkable and worthy partner.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Mao Ze Dong once famously extolled the virtue of maintaining political power through the ‘barrel of the gun,’ but he also acknowledged the power of the pen. Controlling the pen and the information available to citizens is a vital component to the preservation of authoritarian power and is one of the essential means by which authoritarian regimes have sustained political monopoly. But with the advent of the Information Age and the Internet in the last decade, the world of communications has undergone nothing short of a revolution, creating new possibilities which challenge government control over news outlets and by extension, over public opinion. In this thesis, we are particularly concerned with the question of whether the undeniable democratizing properties of Internet technology has positively influenced opposition movements in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Here, we will examine the cases of China, Singapore and Iran, with special attention to China to see whether the potential of the Internet in these countries is taking flight or if and in what manner said potential is being suppressed by the nation-state.

Throughout the 1990s and onwards, there has been a growing body of literature on the impact and implications of the Internet on democratization and governance as the Internet has evolved to become a central component in liberal individualist visions of electronic democracy. Many have advanced the case that the Internet, unlike any other mode of communication, is immune to government control; many contend that the World Wide Web will destroy hierarchical orders of authority, stifle any restrictions placed on it
and unleash the free exchange of information and ideas worldwide.\(^1\) In short, it will precipitate the demise of the state and democratize regimes heretofore resistant to political change. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the notion that the world is democratizing and that the West is destined to advance it gained new life. Scholars from Francis Fukuyama to Samuel Huntington and Theda Skocpol supplied bold predictions and answers as to what the process of democratization constitutes and the form on which it will likely take. Others like Seymour Martin Lipset famously hypothesizes that it is certain social and economic conditions such as economic wealth, a strong middle class and capitalism which will eventually bring about democracy.\(^2\) The Internet is a potentially powerful feature in this debate as it is a prominent part of the convergence and world-wide impact of the “knowledge explosion” wrought by new sciences and technologies. In a time of momentous change and instant communication, the compartmentalization of the world is gradually dissolving, making it increasingly difficult for the political elite to isolate its people from such change. Indeed, many democratic theorists postulate that the information revolution will force open political and social systems as governments will need to develop more tenable concepts, policies, programs and institutions by which they can deal with said change. But while libertarians point to the remarkable Internet campaign successes of NGOs such as the fight against global landmines and the online movement against the ratification of the Multilateral

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\(^1\) Tamara Shie, “The Tangled Web: does the Internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 13 (2004): 524.

Agreement on Investment (MAI),\(^3\) such highlights simplify the matter and fail to reflect the situation within many developing nation-states. One of the major deficiencies in past research is that they make generalizations on the political impact of the Internet based on the technical and architectural features of the Internet, thereby abstracting and de-contextualizing the technology from the national and political contexts in which it was introduced. An examination of the experiences of China, Singapore and Iran will show that the technology does not produce uniform and undifferentiated effects across varying countries and contexts. There is a real need to embed research in this area into the national political context; to understand Internet use and its impact on developing nations, we need to adopt an approach that takes into account the numerous socio-political factors and variables that intervene in the political use of the technology. The specific brand of civil society imagined in this thesis is not the form that Robert D. Putnam takes on in “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,”\(^4\) where civic engagement may include a range of innocuous social activities including professional societies, sports clubs and recreational organizations. The engagement of citizens in loosely-based organizations is not taken to be an indication of a strong civil life and social movement. The thesis is primarily concerned with and will define ‘civil society’ as the collection of activities which can be identified as strong opposition movements or an agitation against


the state and government actions.

In this thesis, I will argue that while the Internet has engendered greater political and social awareness, ultimately, it can not be said to be a democratizing force. Experiences in the use of the Internet in several Asian countries reveal unforeseen dynamics which have not been captured by a large body of literature and studies which focus primarily on North America and Western Europe, where democratic traditions have been entrenched for centuries. In this thesis, I am making two main contributions. First, I advance the argument that in the case of China and other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states such as Singapore, the development of Internet technology and its use, have failed to engender democratization or more active opposition movements. Contrary to prediction, the very reverse is in fact happening, whereby state authorities are emboldened and enriched by the Internet and have begun to see and use the technology as a vital tool for governance and control. Secondly, I identify a number of conditions which contribute to the strengthening of the authority of the nation-state, making it possible for certain governments to suppress online activism. The first and perhaps most important of these conditions is the ability and foresight of certain states to put into place the necessary legal and regulatory mechanisms to prevent and stop the medium from straying into impermissible territory. Those states which had the foresight to enact strong controls before the proliferation of Internet technology have a clear advantage over those which do not have such mechanisms in place and are merely reacting to any changes and advancements in the technology. Another crucial condition for success is the proper use
of e-government. Those states which recognize the political and administrative benefits of
the Internet are now taking and streamlining government operations online, thus putting
those with a more sophisticated understanding of the potential of the medium at a distinct
advantage. And lastly, the successful cooptation of the entrepreneurial class (both
domestic and foreign Internet entrepreneurs) via an incentive structure from which this
group benefits, means that those with the power to propel political reform are reluctant to
bite the hand that feeds it and take on the politics of opposition. The pacification of the
Internet media sector is a crucial condition for success and those governments which have
managed to recruit these important partners are much more likely to succeed. By no
means is the absence of one of these conditions an indication that the regime has failed to
control its online medium, but the presence of all of these factors positively signals a
robust and successful movement towards full control of opposition movements online and
by extension, a slowdown of democratization offline. The presence and combination of
these conditions will likely generate an online society and culture that is politically
stagnant. Authoritarian societies which have not been shaken by the vast availability of
online resources and the well of opportunities that this revolution in information offers
are home to citizens who are largely disinterested in political activism and are willing to
practice self-censorship. Those who feel that the regime is more or less meeting their
daily needs are reluctant to disturb and present challenges to the status quo. One might
present that argument that the tactics that the Chinese and Singaporean states have
utilized are largely inconsequential since opposition does not largely exist in these
A summation of literature on the Internet and democratization will be presented in Chapter 2 along with arguments made for the Internet’s influence on the growth of opposition movements. Here, it will be shown that the information-sharing and truth-exposing characteristic of Internet technology is undeniable and has provided fuel for the libertarian camp. Chapter 3 will present information on Internet use and penetration in China and Singapore and suggest that these states appear comfortable with concurrently promoting and controlling the advancement of Internet technology. Chapter 4 advances the thesis by showing in systematic fashion just how the state has been able to maintain its power and authority in the Information Age. Through a series of regulatory, proactive and reactive measures, states such as China and Singapore have managed to subdue the democratic potential of the Internet. The last section will present Iran as a contrast case and explore the circumstances behind the growing blogging culture which persists in the face of government control in that society. An examination of the reasons behind the differences between the two Asian cases and Iran will further illuminate the contention that the use and impact of the Internet will vary under different national and social contexts.
Chapter 2: The Internet as a Democratic Tool

The information revolution which began after World War Two along with the proliferation of computers and advanced communications systems were recognized by many to be a powerful and positive force for global change.\(^5\) Since its inception, the Internet carried with it an anti-authoritarian feeling and was envisioned by social scientists, politicians and communication practitioners to be a potentially liberating and democratizing force in the world. As part of a wave of new advances made in information technology, the Internet was regarded as a particularly potent instrument for the spread of pluralism and democracy in countries where constrictions are placed on political debate and participation.\(^6\) The rapid and dramatic expansion of the technology globally has captured the imagination of scholars and led to predictions that the Internet will break down political control and usurp the tight-fisted reign of authoritarian rule. This generally optimistic liberal mood is captured in an extract of a letter published in the *South China Morning Post*: “The Internet and associated technology is like a snowball which is rolling and getting bigger. It gives everyone a voice, which is why it will still be going while those who seek to regulate it will have departed the scene.” In similar tones, President Bill Clinton once proclaimed,

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In the new century, liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem. We know how much the Internet has changed America, and we are already an open society. Imagine how much it could change China. Now, there’s no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. Good luck. That’s sort of like trying to nail Jello to the wall.\(^7\)

In current literature, the relationship between the Internet and democracy has been clearly and often cogently delineated. Some of the characteristics that are said to be central to the Internet’s ability to corrode totalitarianism include first and foremost, its ability to erode physical and political borders as information bits travel along fiber-optic cables or over satellite bandwidths and mushroom to reach millions around the world.\(^8\) The open-ended, decentralized structure of this medium then allows for the rapid dissemination of information not previously seen with other forms of print and broadcast media.\(^9\) The speed of the Internet’s development and diffusion will likely elude central government control or at the very least, render it extremely difficult for states to cope with.\(^10\) With the world’s information resources now readily available within reach and with the cost of publishing one’s views having rapidly diminished, this new powerful new mode of free expression is predicted to be ground-breaking for many societies.\(^11\) But more than just free expression, the Internet provides the ideal venue for individuals with like views and

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\(^11\) Simon vii.
interests to freely associate, share information and jointly advance their agendas – political or otherwise. And it is this particular characteristic of the Internet which is said to pose the greatest challenge to dictatorial regimes as the empowerment of citizens is said to bring about the slow erosion of authority generally. Related to this then, the Internet thereby crucially limits the ability of governments to regulate the activities in which citizens engage online. Lawrence Lessig of Harvard Law School contends: “Borders keep people in and hence governments could regulate. Cyberspace undermines this balance…(and) escape from regulation becomes easier. The shift is away from the power of government to regulate and toward the power of individuals to escape government regulation.” More generally, the Internet acts as a powerful enabler of education – a crucial foundation of democracy. It permits access to a vast array of information from global sources, increasing the ability of citizenry to bypass state-controlled media and to think outside the political parameters established by the government. Newspapers, articles and even books are made available for online scrutiny, a haven of knowledge for a growing middle class. The Internet is also believed to have the power to bring about government change, forcing the state apparatus to become more democratic. As those countries which insist on maintaining nineteenth-century methods of conducting business will be doomed to failure, many states will be forced to take their

12 Simon 9.
13 Simon 10.
15 Simon 12.
daily business online, thus making government information more readily accessible and transparent to citizens. This opens up a line of communication and information sharing between state officials and the citizenry not previously available.

**International Internet Campaign Success**

In numerous respects, there is reason to believe that the Internet is a vehicle for political change and transformation in the world. Instances demonstrating the transformational impact and utility of the Internet on the growth of opposition movements abound, succor for those supportive of the libertarian perspective. On the international front, it would appear that Internet technology has played an indispensable role in the formation and management of NGO coalitions for efforts such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and the campaign against the OECD’s proposed Multilateral Agreement Initiative (MAI).\(^{16}\) In both campaigns, coordinators utilized chat forums, websites and e-mail to build a strong arsenal of protest: Internet technology gave NGOs the means to spread their message and to organize a coherent, united campaign on the issue of their choice. One writer contends that the Internet has contributed to an “internationalization of contentious activity” and has become “an efficient and accessible way for individuals and groups to target new and emerging

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international structures such as the WTO and EU. “17 Overall, there is wide agreement that in a technologically-interdependent, age, the Internet has dramatically altered the dynamics of contentious behaviour and political participation in the international arena.

**Libertarian Arguments**

On the national front, in countries like China, foreign observers contend that a growing chatroom culture and online news media offering less controlled news and commentary than state-controlled offline news outlets such as radio, television and print will gradually harness the growth of independent public opinion in that country. It is argued that the globalization of the world’s media industries and the universal market logic according to which they operate will pose a unique challenge to China’s national media system as the Internet has stepped up the shift towards the marketization of mass media. With the arrival of Internet services and online news providers, there is speculation that the influence of the Chinese Communist Party and its all-encompassing monopoly on what may “constitute the truth” is slowly eroding. The fierce competition among all the variants of news media forces online editors and journalists to push the limits of programming and professional norms in order to produce research and fashionable online layouts which will appeal to an informed, tech-savvy audience. 18

by doing so, by publishing diverse news stories free of propagandist tones, the managers of online news networks are in effect brokering new space for public opinion, encouraging the communication and circulation of alternative voices online.\textsuperscript{19}

Many observers of authoritarian regimes suggest that the Internet has become a gateway for a more dynamic interplay between those opposed to the state and the government, creating new opportunities for the revitalization of opposition movements.\textsuperscript{20} Here, we will draw primarily from examples in China, as specific incidences of civil protest in this country are well-recorded and studied; China also serves as the best case study as it is representative of movements taking shape or rather of what may be possible in other authoritarian countries. The Internet is said to have transformed the arena of public opinion in Chinese society: the technology allows for the active engagement of netizens, who are now strongly involved in the information dissemination and production process in Chinese cyberspace, a domain conventionally monopolized by the state’s media channels.\textsuperscript{21} A strong civil society that is exposed to this brand-new information environment and empowered by new-found possibilities has created powerful pressure for change on the part of the state, as individuals are able to engage in public debates on all matters of social and political issues.\textsuperscript{22} This online public sphere has then become an important barometer of public sentiment for a regime which is accustomed to suppressing dissenting voices. Chinese authorities have in turn, demonstrated concern for network

\textsuperscript{19} Dam 59.
\textsuperscript{21} Tai 290.
\textsuperscript{22} Tai 188.
opinion and have on occasion responded to the outpouring of public sentiments in their policy toward certain issues.  

The Internet is also cultivating a burgeoning body of autonomous individuals, a steady cohort of opinion leaders who regularly contribute online communications in their written debates and deliberations. And more pertinent to our purposes here, the medium has turned into a hotbed of collective action for opposition movements in the country as the existence of a forum for the dissemination of information and the formulation of goals and strategies has brought fresh new elements to the art of protest. Online protests and signatory campaigns are now the selected means by which netizens are expressing their discontent with the status quo as the Internet ensures the success of protest by allowing actors to share information, identify opponents and organize events with alacrity, at low costs and with relatively less personal risk.

**Truths Exposed: The Internet as a Forum for Ground-breaking News**

Since its inception, not only has the Internet been the forum for groups and individuals to openly express their grievances, it has become the means by which a number of serious bureaucratic and national security concerns have been exposed. It was through the Internet that citizens first learned of the blood donation scandal and the mismanagement of donation facilities which led to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Henan.

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23 Tai 290.
24 Tai 188.
Province during the early 1990s. The Internet has played an increasingly prominent role in the dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS in China – both throughout China itself and to the outside world and vice versa, at a time when information at the local level was extremely limited. Over the years, persistent efforts by the Internet media, international and domestic groups along with individual Chinese activists to gather and publish AIDS-related information, provide support and solicit donations have brought a great deal of pressure to bear on the Chinese government, forcing authorities to openly acknowledge this health crisis. Finally, after years of denial and cover-up, the Chinese Health Minister officially acknowledged before the UNGA Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2001 that as many as 600 000 cases of HIV existed in China – a major breakthrough for activists in the country. Much like the HIV/AIDS crisis, the SARS epidemic of 2003 further demonstrates that in today’s globalized information society, it is nearly impossible for any government to keep its citizens in the dark. In the spring of 2003, a new lethal virus called atypical pneumonia in China and defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), first broke out in China’s southern Guangdong province, spreading to Beijing and other regions in the country before it conflagrated into a global epidemic crisis. The evolution of SARS from a regional outbreak to a national medical crisis spotlighted the gross inequities and inefficiencies present in China’s public health care system, something which proved to be

27 Tai 217.
28 Tai 216.
a political embarrassment for the Chinese leadership. As one writer summarizes, the SARS crisis “highlights all the contradictions of the Chinese development model, the inequality it has generated, and the obsolescence of a certain mode of government that is ferociously monopolistic within a context of extraordinary diversification.” When SARS first broke out in November 2002, very little was known about the disease as there was virtually no media coverage of the event; only when the disease spread to neighbouring cities and infected more patients did rumours spread by word of mouth and Short Message Service (SMS). As news broke out all over the Internet chat rooms and the availability of the information proliferated, Chinese authorities were forced to alter their approach to dealing with a health scare whose spread was hushed in the official media. Pressure exerted by the global media along with Chinese civil society played a crucial role in holding officials accountable to both citizens and the world writ large. And it would appear that at least in the short-term, officials have finally grasped the wisdom that has so often eluded them in the past, as they now comprehend the price of information cover-up and the benefits that come with transparency. Changes in leadership policy reflects clearly in an incident which took place after the SARS outbreak, when a Chinese submarine sank during a training mission in the Yellow Sea, killing all seventy crew members aboard; this time, the government went public with news of the tragedy. Furthermore, partly as a fallout from the SARS outbreak, the Ministry of Civil Affairs

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29 Tai 216.
30 Tai 217.
31 Tai 237.
32 Tai 237.
33 Tai 243.
and the National Security Bureau jointly announced on September 12, 2005 that the state will no longer classify the casualties of natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and epidemics as state secrets and such incidents may now be reported by the media.\(^{34}\)

Another incident which further demonstrates the significance of the Internet to social forces is the school explosion in Jiangxi in 2001. In Wanzai county of China’s southeast province of Jiangxi, a village school suddenly collapsed after a loud explosion, trapping about 200 grade school children and teachers in the debris; the blast resulted in 41 deaths and 27 injuries.\(^{35}\) The Internet played an indispensable role in circulating the news to a national audience and in challenging the official version of the story, which rested sole blame on the work of a madman. But not soon after the tragedy, the true story emerged and spread in chatrooms and online forums, where it was discovered that local officials had the schoolchildren construct firecrackers in order to generate revenue.\(^{36}\) The incident caused shock worldwide, creating an outburst of public opinion online, which took the government by surprise. Premier Zhu Rongji, well aware of the possibility that facts were falsified by the local officials, noticed the discrepancy between coverage of the story by the official news outlet, \textit{Xinhua} and the overseas media.\(^{37}\) On March 15, 2001, in a televised press conference, Premier Zhu offered official apologies to the Chinese people and the families of the victims of the school explosion for which he stated the State Council and he “bear an unshirkable responsibility,” an unprecedented act in Chinese

\(^{34}\) Tai 244.
\(^{35}\) Tai 244.
\(^{36}\) Shanthi Kalathil, “Between the lines: China’s dot communism,” \textit{Foreign Policy} (January/February) 2001: 494.
politics.\textsuperscript{38} This marked the first time that a high-standing official was forced to respond to public anger which was partly generated by Internet users.\textsuperscript{39} In all these cases, the Internet played an indispensable role in circulating crucial pieces of information to a domestic audience and in challenging the official version of events. Internet activism has proven to be an especially promising line of development for China’s opposition movements as access to unfettered information and the free exchange of opinion are empowering ordinary citizens to take a stand against the official line and to hold government accountable to its actions. A pattern appears to be emerging in which the Internet is facilitating the mobilization of various social forces in China to create change in civil society-government relations.

\textsuperscript{38} Tai 247.

\textsuperscript{39} Shanthi Kalathil, “Between the lines: China’s dot communism,”\textit{Foreign Policy} (January/February) 2001: 494.
Chapter 3: Internet Penetration in China and Singapore

There is growing evidence that many citizens in authoritarian regimes such as China and Singapore are active participants in what has become a robust Internet culture. When the technology was first established in China, a mere 23,000 Chinese, most of whom were government officials and select academics, were able to gain access.\textsuperscript{40} Since then, the Internet has proliferated across the country, with the latest 2005 PRC data putting the number of users in China (excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) at 111 million, approximately a five-fold increase from 23 million in 2001.\textsuperscript{41} While present numbers indicate that only 10 percent of the population currently enjoys access, this statistic is expected to rise annually as China continues to promote Internet development and experiences rapid economic growth. The country’s personal computer market has already become the second largest in Asia, after Japan and is the fastest growing market in the world, with an annual growth rate of 45.1 percent.\textsuperscript{42} Despite the economic slowdown in Southeast Asia following the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, the late 1990s saw an explosion of Internet users in Singapore as the country achieved tremendous Internet penetration.\textsuperscript{43} According to a 2000 survey on Infocommunications Usage in Households by the Infocommunication Development Authority (IDA), from 1988 to 2000,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{42} Tamara Shie, “The Tangled Web: does the Internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party?” \textit{Journal of Contemporary China} 13 2004:527.
\end{flushleft}
computer ownership among Singaporeans grew from 11% to 66.1%, with half of all Singaporean homes having Internet access.\textsuperscript{44} Taken together, the entry of the Internet, growing connectivity, new telecommunication devices along with ever higher literacy rates have lent new momentum to people-to-people communications in these countries.

**State Promotion of the Internet**

While all the basic characteristics of the Internet appear to add up to a strong democratic bias, and regimes such as China and Singapore appear eager to reap the Net’s commercial potential, these countries are truly conflicted, as they are attempting to achieve the formidable task of reaping the benefits of the Internet while minimizing the incurrence of negative political effects. Beginning in 1979 with the accession of the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China has pursued the modernization of both the industrial and technology sectors of the economy, hoping to disengage the country from the isolation and economic autarky characteristic of the Maoist period. As China’s information technology (IT) industry has expanded by as much as three times the rate of the overall economy, it has largely fuelled and sustained the country’s 8 percent growth rate and is attracting much-needed investment. As it is becoming increasingly apparent that the development of the telecommunications sector is vital to the economy and by extension, the stability of the regime, Chinese officials have wholeheartedly embraced the IT sector, making it a cornerstone of their modernization schemes. But while Chinese

\textsuperscript{44} Gomez 13.
reformers and business leaders understand that the Internet is a vital element to economic growth and have adapted policies to contribute to its growth, including investments in the country’s academic and research network and the introduction of private competition into telecommunications, they are conversely nervous about the unlimited potential of the Internet for civil society growth in the country. Communist party cadres and bureaucrats along with the police and military are all eager to impose censorship, registration, encryption and other such rules so as to regulate online activity. Singapore also presents a fascinating case study as leaders there have fostered one of the most comprehensive strategies for the development of IT anywhere in the world, supported by generous state-led infrastructure investments. There is every indication that policymakers in the country are committed to the transformation of the island economy into an international information hub; yet leaders there have no intention of surrendering political control in the process. At the same time that these states are actively promoting Internet development as part of their pursuit of economic growth and modernization, authorities realize that this medium presents a formidable challenge to government control over information flows and as a result, have enacted tough regulations to stem any political impact. If there is an inherent contradiction to the approach of concurrently promoting and controlling the Internet, it is one with which these states appear

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46 Simon 15.
48 Rodan 64.
comfortable at the moment.
Chapter 4: The Enduring Authority of the Nation-State

The imputation that there is an inherently political character to the Internet is ultimately erroneous as its impact can not really be separated from human use of the technology or be abstracted from the national and political contexts in which it is introduced. The experiences of Singapore and China testify to the fact that the mere existence of technologies such as the Internet has little or no relevance for democratization, unless other necessary and critical conditions are also in place. The purely technical characteristic of the medium along with its glorious democratic potential cannot be extrapolated from the socio-political factors and variables that drive uses of such technologies in specific ways and contexts. While in theory, anyone may access and share political and controversial news online, this potential is still limited and manipulated by coercive instruments which are at the disposal of the state machinery. In countries with weak or nascent democratic traditions, the inherently global structure of the Internet clearly has not eroded the power and authority of the nation-state to take action against media coverage that is critical of a nation’s practices and political establishment.

In the cases under study, China and Singapore serve as potent examples of authoritarian regimes which have exercised their power to establish very effective controls over the Internet and which, to the chagrin of many, have managed to utilize the medium to further state goals. Both states had the foresight to establish strong legal and regulatory mechanisms in order to guard and govern online activity. There is a definite
sense that while authorities in these countries are actively promoting Internet technology, any such progress is very much controlled and manipulated by the government in power. These states appear to recognize the benefits of the Internet and have embraced it as a state tool to help streamline and strengthen governmental operations and functions. In the case of China more so than Singapore, authorities have also managed to pacify both domestic and foreign Internet media actors, ensuring that cooperation from this sector is rewarded with government support for continued business in the country. A crucial characteristic that these states share is the ability to stay ahead of the game by utilizing their technological and organizational savvy to mollify both the public and Internet media. As a result, the vast majority of Singaporeans and Chinese appear to have fallen into a state of complacency. Some may remain ignorant of the state’s control and manipulation of online content but it would be fair to say that many simply do not care. For the average middle-class individual, the cost of dissent is prohibitively high, with self-censorship being the far the more pragmatic course of action. Iran appears to challenge the claims of the paper by serving as a contrast case which illuminates the reasons behind the failure of some developing countries to control the Internet. The Iranian government has operated under a set of political and social circumstances which contrast greatly from those of China and Singapore. In the initial stages of Internet development in the country, authorities there actively welcomed the unfettered growth of the technology; Iran is then in a much weaker state as controls are more difficult to implement once the technology has blossomed. And not only does Iran’s control regime lag behind those of China and
Singapore, but the country has not displayed an understanding of the importance of e-government. In short, Iranian authorities have not utilized the Internet with the brand of creativity and imagination that Chinese and Singaporean authorities have displayed. And perhaps more importantly, the citizens of Iran and most especially, its youth, are hungry for political and socio-economic change and they are taking their opinions online. This concoction of forces means that Iran has not managed to successfully utilize and reign in online resources and will continue to find itself more exposed to protest than its Asian counterparts.

Civil Society Suppressed

If the concept of civil society should consist of basic elements such as: autonomous individuals; engagement in more or less organized activities; civic associations in relation to the state; and a public sphere ‘outside the immediate control of the state but not entirely contained within the private sphere of family,’ such characteristics have yet to manifest in current Chinese and Singaporean society.\(^49\) In the case of China, observers often point to the activism and success of the Falun Gong movement: when the organization was declared illegal, the group took its battle with the government online and has since coordinated most of its activities via the Internet.\(^50\) Over the years, the


group has managed to establish an extremely sophisticated presence online with its main
title, www.falundafa.org as the main port of entry and hub of global communication for
its radio, tv stations, print media outlets and websites worldwide.\textsuperscript{51} In addition to
updating members on the latest news, commentary, testimonials, deliberative pieces and
the teachings of Master Li Hongzhi, the Internet also provides the means by which
overseas Falun Gong members may establish links with their cohorts inside China and to
publicize stories of government persecutions of believers in China to a global audience.\textsuperscript{52}
In early 1999, through its cybernetwork links, group members managed to circumvent
government surveillance and covertly planned and organized a mass demonstration which
took place right at the heart of the CCP’s headquarters at Zhongnanhai, Beijing, catching
authorities completely off-guard.\textsuperscript{53} Another prominent case that illustrates the dramatic
effect of the Internet on social movements in the country is the Tiananmen Mother Group
Campaigns.\textsuperscript{54} The Internet has over the years become a critical tool for the group to
communicate to the general public all over the world and to express their grievances and
to conversely receive support from the public.\textsuperscript{55} Importantly, the Internet has provided the
venue for the mothers to publish their open letters, witness accounts, victim lists, public
statements, declarations and news releases to fuel their campaign.\textsuperscript{56} The widespread

\textsuperscript{51} Wacker 66.
\textsuperscript{53} Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark. “Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control Over Network Infrastructure and
\textsuperscript{55} Tai 107.
\textsuperscript{56} Tai 106.
interest in and support for the Mothers Campaign have exerted formidable pressure on Chinese officials, resulting in a degree of leniency in authorial handling of the group.\textsuperscript{57}

The major glitch in this scenario, however, is we find that the vast majority of those who are politically active online are individuals who are \textit{already} sympathetic to messages invoking reform and change. Falun Gong is clearly a group which \textit{already} operates outside of the law. Understandably then, there is a strong motivation for the group to take their activities online. And ironically, those who may benefit the most from counter-hegemonic uses of the Internet such as farmers groups and the peasantry are precisely those who are deprived of access. The fact remains that Internet diffusion in the country remains relatively low and the vast majority of those with access are of middle class and well-educated – precisely the people who are most likely to align themselves with the government’s efforts in economic reform and who have more to lose should they challenge the regime.\textsuperscript{58} As a result, the mere existence of the Internet as a research tool and the greater availability of information has not prompted the average citizen to be more activist and involved in local and national politics. While the typical user today is in the same age cohort as some of the young activists who were among the leaders of several democracy campaigns which culminated in the movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989, it does not appear that they are applying their online networking skills for social

\textsuperscript{57} Tai 107.

activism.\textsuperscript{59} For some, the danger of getting caught by random government checks of chatrooms will suffice to institute self-censorship. But the supposition that many are even remotely interested in political activism would be a stretch as most are driven online for entertainment purposes and to gather information and access educational services.\textsuperscript{60}

While chat groups allow for virtually unrestricted opportunity for the congregation of like-minded individuals, in practice, conversations are often parochial and bland with people sharing information on personal matters, travels and family and contain little debate of current events or political issues.\textsuperscript{61} This is not to say that discussions of contentious issues do not occur. The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the April 2001 incident involving a collision between a Chinese fighter aircraft and an American military plan generated a torrent of debate.\textsuperscript{62} But attempts to categorize such discussions as being of an anti-government nature or as political dialogue are difficult, not to mention the possibility that the discussants may not even live in China and would be willing and able to vent their anger anyways. The form of dialogue which is more difficult for the police to monitor is the conventional e-mail. But like chat groups, there is little evidence to indicate that e-mail messages are of a socially disruptive nature.\textsuperscript{63} In order to prevent penetration of e-mail groups, users must limit the reach of

\textsuperscript{59} Harwit 401.
\textsuperscript{62} Harwit 405.
\textsuperscript{63} Harwit 405.
their contacts and thereby, the technology loses its ability to involve a larger number of citizens. Even the most interactive technology holds little value if users possess little political motivation and if the political climate restricts usage of the technology. A weak civil society in the brick and mortar world will inevitably obstruct development of strong opposition movements on the Internet.

The Regulatory Regime: Effective Mechanisms of Control

Developments in the Asian Internet landscape undoubtedly belie the notion that the Internet eludes all forms of regulation and control. In this context, states have managed to put in place the necessary legal and regulatory mechanisms to stop the medium from straying into impermissible territory. National security and stability, the preservation of moral and ethical standards along with the need to punish violators of the law have constituted some of the stronger arguments in favour of regulatory mechanisms.  

When the Internet was first introduced into China, it was bound by few rules and regulations; but once the number of users began to climb, authorities realized its vast potential and sought to rein the new medium in. The development of the Internet has been placed under the control of three government agencies: the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the State Education Commission (SEC), with the MII holding the majority of the responsibility for regulating

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its growth. Much of the concern surrounding the use of the Internet is the exposure of citizens to potentially subversive and damaging online content. Given that the state has long had restrictions on the spread of material related to pornography, gambling and anything deemed “counterrevolutionary,” the Internet posed a very real threat which the government was ready to combat.

The country’s first regulations, the ‘Provisional Directive on the Management of International Connections by Computer Information Networks in the PRC,’ were signed into effect by Premier Li Peng on 1 February, 1996; since then, additional regulations have been instituted, with some explicitly exerting the state’s control over online activities. Of main concern here is Article 15 of the Directive, the ‘Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services,’ which lists illegal online content. They include but are not limited to information which is at variance with basic Constitutional principles; endangers national security; divulges state secrets; subverts the government; undermines national unification; is detrimental to the honour and interests of the state; undermines the state’s policies on religion; preaches evil cults or feudalistic and superstitious beliefs. Such regulations are complemented by proactive efforts to gain control of the Internet through the use of router and firewall technology, which has made China the most sophisticated content-filtering Internet regime in the world. Given that

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66 Shie 532.
67 Shie 532.
68 Michelle W. Lau, “Internet Development and Information Control in the People’s Republic of China,” CRS Report for Congress:
the definition for subversive content can be all-inclusive, a wide variety of sites (both domestic and foreign) have been blocked. In addition to the banning of websites by groups like Falun Gong, human rights organizations or political parties calling for reform, officials have made popular foreign news sources which are often critical of China, such as the BBC, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN and Time Magazine difficult to access.\(^{69}\) Any objective reporting regarding sensitive topics such as China’s human rights record, Taiwan, Tibetan independence or the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown has been the target of pervasive filtering and is largely absent online.

In order to suppress undesirable online content, the government has employed a complex system of surveillance and punitive action as a way of promoting self-censorship among the public. The state has managed to control the actions of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs), placing responsibility for infractions of regulations at their door. All ISPs must obtain an operating license from the MII and keep meticulous records of each customer’s account number, phone number, IP address, sites visited and time spent online.\(^{70}\) With the proliferation of Internet cafes across the country, the government has sought to supervise their activities as well, expecting that owners will generally police themselves and comply with regulations.

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those websites which have managed to bypass filtering through these various stages, the
Ministry of Public Security (MPS) reportedly employs over 30,000 human monitors or
“cyber-police” to scrutinize online content.\textsuperscript{71} As of 2000, this new division has been
incorporated into the police departments of 700 cities and provinces in China.\textsuperscript{72} In
addition, authorities have also solicited the help of citizens themselves, encouraging
individuals to be vigilant in monitoring content. In July 2004, a large network of online
reporting centres with a reward component was established by the MPS, inciting citizens
to report any illegal or harmful information.\textsuperscript{73} Violations of government regulations have
met with strong punitive measures. Websites which did not obtain government
authorization before distributing news faced the threat of closure and fines of up to 30,000 yuan (US$ 3,700).\textsuperscript{74} The country reportedly holds anywhere between 15 and 54
“cyber dissidents” in prison for posting material that is deemed subversive. Certain
individuals have been apprehended so as to alert the public to the futility of resistance.
High profile arrests include that of Lin Hai, who was accused of “inciting the overthrow
of the state,” for having sent over 30,000 e-mail addresses to \textit{Dacankao}, an underground
electronic newsletter based overseas; he was sentenced to two years in jail and was
stripped of his political rights for a year.\textsuperscript{75} In another incident, Huang Qi, an activist in
Sichuan Province, was arrested for posting online information about the victims of the

\textsuperscript{71} Lau.
\textsuperscript{72} Lau.
\textsuperscript{73} Lau.
\textsuperscript{74} Lau.
Tiananmen demonstrations.\textsuperscript{76} While cases which have escalated to the point of arrest and imprisonment are rare, stiff fines and prison sentences have scared off the vast majority of Chinese citizens, effectively sending the message that the state will not tolerate opposition. By imposing strict rules guiding Internet use and by enacting unforgiving punishment on violators, the state has stunned the public into silence by making the cost of dissent prohibitively high.

**The Internet as a Government Tool**

The possibility of the Internet becoming another medium dominated by the powerful is a very real possibility in authoritarian regimes. For a Chinese audience that is concerned with current events, the government has sought to satiate its appetite for news by inundating the Internet with state-approved sites – a strategy which has proven to be successful. In order to distract netizens away from subversive material, these attractive, glossy sites drive down the need for users to access foreign sites. As a result, the country’s top five websites and the ones generating the most hits are Xinhua News Agency, *Renmin Ribao*, China Radio International, China Daily and China Internet Information Centre – media outlets all owned and controlled by the state.\textsuperscript{77} The People’s Daily, a state-sponsored newspaper, also has an online bulletin board called the ‘Strong


\textsuperscript{77} Tamara Shie, “The Tangled Web: does the Internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 13 2004: 534.
Nation Forum,’ a site fast becoming the most popular and influential political forum. By cleverly opening up selective public spaces, the state has been able to mould the public sphere of debate and to channel political discourse in the direction of its choice. True to its title, the ‘Strong Nation Forum’ is intended for discussions on how China may transform into a stronger nation. So long as postings are not directed against the government and do not challenge state policies, the site provides an officially tolerated outlet for nationalist sentiment.

On occasion, events will invoke an outpouring of patriotic fervour and anti-Western opinion. In the spring of 2005, during the fallout in relations between China and Japan concerning Japan’s alleged re-writing of its wartime atrocities in history textbooks, the forum welcomed a deluge of anti-Japanese postings. Following the American EP-3 reconnaissance plane incident and the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, officials closely scrutinized the commentaries and personal statements which users expressed on the site. Crucially, by allowing for the growth of controlled nationalism and for forums such as this one and others to generate much needed debate, the government is pre-emptively allowing for the broadening of acceptable discourse in order to stave off a massive blow-out of pent-up public frustration. Many observers enthusiastically argued that the SARS epidemic would like be “China’s Chernobyl”, a breakout event which

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79 Lau.
would induce fundamental political changes at the institutional level. However, it did not take long for the government to realize the potential of the Internet as a propaganda tool; at the height of the outbreak, in typical Chinese propagandist fashion, officials used the Internet as a mass mobilization tool to capitalize on the patriotism of the Chinese people and called on citizens to organize social groups to join its efforts in defeating the disease. The Internet was then used to organize and recruit volunteer groups from all walks of life, including schools, professional groups and other affiliations to join efforts in activities such as blood donation, sanitation of public places, information dissemination and disease prevention. The level of enthusiasm and support for the Chinese government which came forth during the nationwide SARS campaign took many by surprise. It would appear that citizen confidence in the government was duly restored and China was even internationally praised for its handling of the crisis. Indeed, the dual nature of civil society and its relationship with the state is demonstrated here as citizens may just as easily become a tool of the state as they may oppose state actions. By monitoring and tolerating a degree of healthy discussion in the relatively controlled environment of chatrooms and bulletin boards, the state is realistic about the fact that citizens in a country that is bursting with socioeconomic growth will acquire and deliberate new ideas, and will need to vent and voice their dissatisfaction. So long as discussion does not directly demean the Party-state, the Internet in actuality provides a

81 Tai 241.
82 Tai 242.
means by which officials can gather otherwise unattainable information by tapping into the heart of public opinion. Authorities can now enter the domain of problem articulation, gauge exactly where the citizenry stands on any given issue and be notified when the tide of opinion is shifting or changing, making the task of governance arguably easier.

**Improving Governance Through E-Government**

The Chinese state today is also cultivating a more sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of e-government and has actively adopted the medium to advance its own goals. Because the state has always confronted the problem of decentralized authority, the Internet allows the Centre to consolidate its power and establish a more efficient means of communication with provincial governments. A number of departments and bureaucracies have established their own homepages or put databases and archives on the web; some ministers and officials even have e-mail addresses at which they can be reached by the general public. While such a move appears to render the government more vulnerable to critique by allowing citizens to access information previously unavailable, it is a step which in the long run, will likely strengthen the regime. In the eyes of the public, e-government helps to increase the transparency and legitimacy of government agencies and shows that the state is committed to the improvement of civil services. By going online, the state manages to at once enhance efficiency and secure the confidence and trust of the people.

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83 Gomez 79.
**Self-censorship of Intellectuals**

Many believe that the Internet will invite scholars and intellectuals to take their thoughts online, which will result in a flourishing of ideas and a new heretofore unseen activism in this group. To a certain extent, this is true. The expanded space of free expression for intellectuals spells progress as they are signing on to the Internet in large numbers; intellectual websites such as the Formalization of Ideas, which directs serious and scholarly attention to pressing social and political issues are on the rise.\(^8^4\)

Interestingly enough, on this front, the state has adopted new and more subtle strategies and is resorting to a more refined control mechanism than that which is currently employed against the print press or the general public. Rather than shutting down controversial sites outright (though this will always remain an option), authorities extend a greater degree of tolerance towards intellectual website editors, inducing the latter to exercise their own good judgment on the admissibility of submitted articles.\(^8^5\)

Given that there are no strict guidelines as to what constitutes permissible material, and the ever-present fear of being punished by the state looms large, editors, in order to ensure the physical viability of their site, will err on the side of caution and publish articles which would not offend the sensibilities of state actors. The state does not directly interfere with editorial decisions because it does not have to. Remarkably, officials manage to achieve their goal by trusting webmasters to conduct self-censorship and as a

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\(^{8^5}\) Zhou 158.
result, topics such as the Falun Gong, corruption, independent labour unions and political pluralism are virtually untouched by mainstream intellectual websites. After an initial period of free development, many intellectuals discover that there are very real limitations to their capabilities and have found that it is simply easier to give in to the state and offer their cooperation. This way, they can access significant financial and political resources, which they can use to polish their websites to make them more prominent and appealing. This *de facto* alliance between the state and intellectuals means that a truly free, electronic press for academics will not likely emerge in the near future. A medium which holds so much promise for independent thought formation is submerged under the pressure of more pressing, pragmatic concerns.

**Internet Entrepreneurs and Foreign Companies Made Compliant**

With government powering forward the development of the information economy, conventional wisdom holds that an emerging class of internet-empowered entrepreneurs along with the influx of foreign capitalists will set in motion political reforms and unleash the possibilities that the Internet theoretically holds for an authoritarian regime. But, for the time being, it would appear that the rules of the game are being established by the state as authorities are able to elicit the compliance of these crucial players.

Many have hyped the possibility that an emerging class of Chinese Internet

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86 Zhou 159.

entrepreneurs will propel the political reform agenda but it remains to be seen whether the socioeconomic clout of this group will be cemented and whether these individuals will even take an active interest in political affairs, much less the politics of opposition. As the media sector evolves, domestic Internet start-ups are heavily involved in the complex process of aggregating and disseminating information and are stepping into a role traditionally held by the state propaganda apparatus.\textsuperscript{88} Caught between satisfying market demand and placating central government authority, the Internet media sector is opting to take the latter course and is actively relying on self-censorship in order to appease government desire for political correctness and to secure its market position. In the struggle to control online content, many ICPs are proactively restraining their users and have decided to focus on entertainment rather than politics so as to avoid sticky situations. For example, during the Jiangxi schoolhouse explosion, Sina.com pre-empted Beijing by censoring and restricting the full range of expression on the topic; a week after the incident, authorities demanded that all sites reiterate the official line on the story and companies soon followed suit.\textsuperscript{89}

Compliance with the state was officially cemented in March, 2002 when under the supposed concern over global spam originating in China, over 100 Chinese Internet entrepreneurs voluntarily signed the “Public Pledge on Self-discipline for China Internet Industry” designed to establish ‘self-disciplinary mechanisms’ so as to enhance the


\textsuperscript{89} Kalathil 495.
orderly development of the Internet in the country; the pledge, among other stipulations, encourages surfers to “use the web in a civilized way” and ‘the elimination of deleterious information from the Internet.’ On 8 December 2003, over 30 Internet news and information providers, including Renmin, Xinhua, Sina, Sohu and Net Ease, signed up to a new “Internet News Information Service Self-Discipline Pledge”, in which signatories agreed to “obey government administration and public supervision voluntarily, to resist firmly the Internet transmission of harmful information such as obscenity, pornography and superstition, and to resist the substance of information that violates the fine cultural traditions and moral codes of the Chinese nation.”

The reason that Chinese entrepreneurs are willing to cooperate with the state is because they see themselves as primarily modernizers of the economy rather than political reformers. Government, on the other hand, is allowing for input from this group into the policy-making process and is willing to concede this point in exchange for a partner in Internet control. This appears to fall perfectly in line with studies previously conducted by scholars such as Kellee Tsai and Bruce Dickson who have concluded that there is little evidence to support the notion propounded by scholars that the development of a private, entrepreneurial elite will eventually drive democracy in the country. In works such as Capitalism Without Democracy, Tsai focuses on the activities and aspirations of those private entrepreneurs who are driving China’s economic growth. She finds that

90 Kalathil 499.
despite the optimistic predictions of political observers and global business leaders, the widely-held assumption that China’s entrepreneurial class is poised to make demands for democracy is ill-founded.\textsuperscript{92} While entrepreneurs as a group has had a structural impact on Chinese politics, they are not exercising a brand of political assertiveness that would profoundly alter the nation’s formal political institutions and traditions.\textsuperscript{93} Her arguments cohere with those of Dickson’s who disagrees with those who see in China’s growing array of corporatist ties a path to gradual political liberalization. He finds that those who are financially and personally invested in the country’s economy and growth will understandably reject any advancements which may bring about social and political instability.\textsuperscript{94} The bottom line is that among the economic elite Dickson surveyed, there was shown to be “no relationship between indicators of individual prosperity and support for political reform.”\textsuperscript{95} And so those who have the power to unleash to the fullest extent the power of the Internet are not eager to push the state on the freedom of the press and speech. Internet entrepreneurs are increasingly involved in a pragmatic and consultative relationship with the government, whereby both parties are aligning their complementary visions and goals.

The lure of China’s untapped markets and the prospect of doing business in the country have compelled many foreign companies to establish a close relationship with the


\textsuperscript{93} Tsai 2.


\textsuperscript{95} Dickson 137.
Chinese state, making many of these companies just as anxious as the domestic media not to offend the CCP. While Western media frequently criticizes China’s obstruction of Internet development, what goes unreported is the fact that foreign firms are the purveyors of the technological means by which the state carries out surveillance. Firms provide the technical solutions such as routers, firewalls and filters which enable authorities to block messages, shut down sites and catch culprits. Cisco Systems is known to have designed a router device and firewall box specifically tailored to the PRC’s telecommunications system, enabling monitors to intercept information and block sensitive websites. Nortel Networks, a Canadian firm, has also developed new techniques for censorship, allowing the state to easily track and identify users and alert officials of trends in content accessed over time.

U.S. software and ISPs such as Yahoo!, Google and Microsoft have also been accused of aiding and abetting the Chinese state. In June of 2005, MSN Spaces, Microsoft’s blog-hosting service began removing sensitive words like “democracy” and “human rights” from use in Chinese blog titles and postings. Later that year, the company was condemned by human rights activists for removing the weblog of a Chinese journalist Zhao Jing, who worked for the Beijing Bureau of the New York Times and was

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98 Shie 535.
known for broaching sensitive political topics on his site.\textsuperscript{100} When America Online unveiled a joint venture with Chinese computer-maker Legend, many predicted that service providers, if requested, may be compelled to submit the names, e-mails and other Internet records of dissidents. Such forecasts came to light when Yahoo! came under international fire after divulging the personal e-mail of Chinese journalist Shi Tao to the PRC government.\textsuperscript{101} In 2004, Shi, an editor at Contemporary Business News based in Hunan province, attended an editorial meeting in which government officials revealed an internal document outlining media restrictions before the 15\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown.\textsuperscript{102} When Shi sent copies of the note via a personal Yahoo! e-mail account to a pro-democracy organization in the U.S., Yahoo!, at the best behest of Chinese authorities, revealed his identity, which led to a criminal conviction and a sentence of ten years in prison.\textsuperscript{103} Senior executives at the company later confirmed that they caved to government pressure and described such actions as part of the burden of conducting business in China.

The reason that foreign media multinationals are equally unlikely to push for a broadening of media parameters is because investors are loathe to compromise their business plans by antagonizing the government. Many companies have taken pains to cultivate a working relationship with authorities and so it is simply easier to adhere to local business practices. Some may test the outer boundaries of what Chinese officials

\textsuperscript{100} Lau.
\textsuperscript{101} Lau.
\textsuperscript{102} Lau.
\textsuperscript{103} Lau.
may deem acceptable, but given that the state dictates the fate of those involved in the business, the industry as a whole, appears to be moving towards more self-discipline and regulation. And so despite the pressure from human rights groups and international condemnation of their actions, corporations are willing to overlook violations of freedom of expression and indeed, even become participants in censorship in order to gain a foothold in the lucrative Chinese market. Companies adamantly deny that they have tailored their products to appease the state, insisting that they are politically neutral entities. This ‘profit over values’ approach and an implicit authoritarian-capitalist coalition perfectly harmonize with the state’s goal of feeding technological growth while stemming public demand for political change.

**Singapore**

In the case of Singapore, recent advances in IT, infrastructural reach and the existence of high literacy rates have not been matched by an expansion in political participation. Attempts in the country to suppress the growth of a genuine civil society not only hamper the PAP’s formal political opponents, but it generally blunts political pluralism, including interest group politics. The increasing affluence of many Singaporeans has grown concurrently with an increased reliance on the state, producing citizens who are vulnerable to cooption and political discipline. Although the government has provided the necessary infrastructure for widespread Internet use in the country, the public is aware of the legal ramifications of misuse and the systems of surveillance and as
a result, a generally nervous air pervades any political use of the Internet. The belief that
the government regularly monitors individuals on the Internet is widespread, producing a
political system that is characterized by incessant apprehension among the majority of its
citizens. This anxiety is based on repeated examples of political challengers consistently
being found guilty of contravening the country’s system of tight and restrictive laws.104
The very suspicion that one’s activities may be closely followed by the state apparatus is
often enough to generate a level of fear which promotes self-censorship. Without an
environment which is supportive of the freedom of expression, online users in the country
will likely continue to bypass the multiple political resources available to them on the
Internet for civic engagement and remain passive citizens of the state.

While Singapore’s techniques for Internet control is less blunt in nature than those of
China, the country’s regulatory framework appears to be equally successful in bringing
the medium under the same tight regime as the country’s other electronic and
non-electronic media. In reference to the flow of ideas, images and information on the
Internet, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew contends, “The top 3 to 5 percent of a
society can handle this free-for-all, this clash of ideas;”105 for the bulk of the population,
however, leaders worry that increased exposure may have destabilizing social and
political effects. Out of concern for unmonitored access, Singapore’s authorities have
gone to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate their capacity to monitor Internet usage,


becoming the first country in 1995 to establish censorship rules for the medium.\textsuperscript{106} Many activists such as James Gomez suggest that the People’s Action Party (PAP) which has been in power for over forty years, is purposefully stifling any signs of political activism or opposition movements in the country.\textsuperscript{107} The party is continuously working to create legislation and cyber taskforces to regulate and control free speech on the Internet, aiming to prevent opposition groups from harnessing the medium for democratic gains. Rather than applying pressure through a strong technical filtering system like China, Singapore’s ruling regime is successfully translating its long and successful history of control over freedom of expression in the traditional media by using a combination of access controls, along with legal and social measures to shape the use of the Internet for political communication.\textsuperscript{108} Singapore has regulated Internet content since 1996. First and foremost, regulations stipulate that local Internet service operators and content providers will have to be licensed and subject to Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA)-imposed conditions.\textsuperscript{109} All political parties, religious organizations and any other individual or organization with web pages containing religious or political content must

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item James Gomez, Internet Politics: Surveillance and Intimidation in Singapore, (Singapore: Think Centre, 2002) 9.
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\end{footnotesize}
register with the SBA. Another requirement puts the onus on service providers to be proactive and exercise their own judgment in preventing the availability of “objectionable content” (that which may threaten public security and national defense, racial and religious harmony) to the general public. All commercial Internet access service providers are required to use proxy servers while public providers such as schools, cyber cafes, libraries and community centres are also expected to connect with the proxy server and install software such as Surfwatch and netNanny to restrict access to objectionable content. And like in China, licensees are required to keep detailed records of subscribers and track their Internet use to assist with investigations. And finally, electronic newspapers must now be registered and are subject to local media laws under the Newspaper and Print Presses Act, under which not only can authors and editors be prosecuted for defamatory or libelous material but distributors and printers may as well. The impetus behind all of these efforts is to apply as much pressure as possible to foster self-censorship and caution in the avoidance of objectionable content.

Another means by which authorities may control media output is the use of lawsuits under the state’s stringent defamation laws. Defamation suits in Singapore constitute a common tactic for controlling speech, where defendants face the prospect of losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in liability. An example which aptly demonstrates the
reach of these laws and their effects on Internet communication involved a student studying at the University of Illinois; Jiahoa Chen, a Singapore citizen who was the recipient of a scholarship from A*STAR (Agency for Science, Technology, and Research), a state-funded agency that supports Singaporeans studying abroad, broke his contractual agreement with A*STAR and had to repay his scholarship to the agency. After criticizing A*STAR in an interview with an electronic newspaper and also on his personal blog regarding what he believed were unjust newly-set requirements for scholarship maintenance, Chen received a series of email messages from the agency’s chairman Philip Yeo threatening legal action and demanding the immediate dissolution of the blog. Chen was forced to shut down his blog under threat of a defamation suit and was further pressured into posting an explicit apology which reads, “I admit and acknowledge that these statements are false and completely without any foundation. I unreservedly apologize to A*STAR, its Chairman Mr. Philip Yeo, and its executive officers for the distress and embarrassment caused to them by these statements.” Such a case reinforces the power of Singapore’s defamation laws and the state’s usage of this tool to shape and manipulate Internet content and citizens’ actions online.

The Singaporean state, like China, also recognizes the distinct political and administrative benefits of the Internet and is seeking to streamline government operations
via a system of networked information management.\textsuperscript{119} E-government constitutes another powerful weapon in the government’s armoury as the country has moved forcefully ahead with its e-government plans, with the primary goal of ensuring that advances in technology are adequately embraced by government institutions to deliver services efficiently to both citizens and businesses.\textsuperscript{120} The understated goal here is to foster the use of technology by the public sector for purposes of better governance as opposed to harnessing it for citizens to cultivate their political rights.


\textsuperscript{120} James Gomez, Internet Politics: Surveillance and Intimidation in Singapore, (Singapore: Think Centre, 2002) 79.
Chapter 5: Iran and a Burgeoning Blogging Culture

Many observers claim that the case of Iran provides an interesting and promising example of the democratic potential of the Internet. Internet use in Iran has soared in recent years, opening a new virtual space for political dissent in the country. In 2001, an estimated 250,000 Iranians were online; by July 2005, that number had climbed to 6.2 million. The Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI), a private company established by the government to implement the Ministry of Communications and Technology’s policies, estimates that by 2009, 25 million Iranians will be online. Internet use in the country was initially strongly promoted by the government as a means to advance scientific and technological progress during the troubled economic period following the Iran-Iraq War. Contrary to expectations at the time, the Islamic Republic originally welcomed the technology with open arms, allowing the commercial and educational sectors Internet access free of hindrance. It was not before long, however, that authorities came to the realization that the Internet would become the venue for anti-government or anti-Islamic activity, prompting the state to increase its controls over Internet material by filtering sites from outside Iran and regulating the activities of online journalists and sites operating within the country. While the country does not have Internet-specific regulations for content, Internet material is controlled under the country’s Press Law of 1986, a series of articles which appear to be purposefully vague.

123 Babak Rahimi, “Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran,” Middle East Review of International Affairs 7 (2003): 105
and ill-defined, forbidding among other things, “publishing material promoting subjects which might damage the foundation of the Islamic Republic, encouraging and instigating individuals and groups to act against the security, dignity and interests of the Islamic Republic of the Iran within or outside the country, or quoting articles from the deviant press, parties and groups which oppose Islam in such a manner as to propagate such ideas.”

Backed up by an extensive series of laws which control the publication of sensitive information, Iran’s filtering regime has actively blacklisted and blocked sites with pornographic, political, gay and lesbian and women’s rights content. The increase in recent years of detentions and arrests of bloggers and online journalists who have published controversial materials testifies to current President Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s commitment to restricting free speech on the Internet.

Despite strong government controls however, a growing phenomenon in Iran which is largely absent in the cases of China and Singapore is the meteoric popularity of weblogs – personal or collective websites where people freely comment on current events. Weblogs are proving to be a promising development for Iranian society, offering a panorama of what is whispered in public and parlayed in private. Bloggers in Iran have in part, evaded censorship efforts by running sites through multiple servers and using foreign-based blogs as portals to Iranian ones whose locations may keep changing.

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While authorities are aware of the volume and power of Iran’s growing blogging culture and have announced plans to outlaw privately run ISPs, fearing too much public outrage, such plans have yet to be executed. As a result, thousands of blogs have cropped up since late 2001 as bloggers have capitalized on this lapse, using this medium for expression on various subjects that is denied to them in public spaces. In *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs*, author Nasrin Alavi presents a multi-voiced account of contemporary Iran using the country’s weblogs as its primary source. Alavi presents Iran as an increasingly educated, youthful and literate country where citizens find Islamist fundamentalism antiquated and are keen to usher in a new era. The anonymity offered by the Internet strips away all timidity; in their Internet diaries, Iranians feel comfortable expressing their opinions on religion and world affairs, their hopes and fears, recriminating the actions of the government and accessing forbidden music and art. Online blogging has also opened up a new alternative medium of expression for women that is normally denied to them in offline spaces.

**Different Conditions in Case Studies**

While the case of Iran appears to challenge the claims of this paper by showing the democratic potential of the Internet, we must be mindful of the different circumstances between Iran and China and Singapore on the other hand. Iranian authorities initially promoted the expansion of the Internet in the 1990s within the
country’s university system, allowing Internet technology to flower among academics and the youth, forgoing any serious controls during this time.128 While it is the youth that has led the Internet revolution in most countries, few have a demographic structure comparable to that of Iran’s where the youth are so uniquely disproportionate to the rest of the population.129 With the post-1979 revolution baby boom coming of age, it has engendered a significant rise in the number of universities that have recently opened along with student enrolment. A growing community of technologically-savvy and educated Iranians has naturally taken to the Internet. And thanks to the Islamic Republic’s policy of free education and its national literacy campaigns, those pursuing higher education come from a relatively wide cross-section of Iranian society.130 As university students return to their villages from their urban learning centres, they introduce the possibilities of the Internet to families and friends, exposing rural areas to the outside world-something previously inconceivable; this produces the crucial effect of extending the Internet’s reach beyond the major urban centres – an event which is presently absent in China. Moreover, the reason that Iran’s political dissidents have found creative ways to challenge state authority is simply due to the fact that the government has been unable to overcome the technical challenges involved in Internet control.131 Iran’s control regime lags far behind that of China’s advanced techno-computer infrastructure, with its

128 “Iran’s Bloggers Fear Clampdown.”
sophisticated system of technical control measures. By implementing proactive control measures such as regime-sponsored web programs, e-government and the implicit encouragement of self-censorship, alongside reactive measures such as filtering and public arrests of Net dissidents, China and Singapore’s control regimes are arguably more comprehensive and successful and demonstrate their desire and ability to both utilize and reign in online resources. One might present the argument that the tactics the Chinese and Singaporean states have utilized are largely inconsequential since opposition does not largely exist in these countries. An alternative hypothesis that one may pose is the idea that the vast majority of Iranians have not experienced the type of economic growth and prosperity that Chinese and Singaporeans have in the last decade and that this goes a long way in explaining the outpouring of political and economic grievances online. This would also illuminate the reason behind the Iranian government’s inability to manage and suppress online expression. Economic instability, however, is not a very accurate indicator of how strong a country’s Internet control regime may be. Myanmar serves as an example of a country where the economy has been stagnant and whose citizens have been vocal in their grievances against the state and have agitated for change, but the regime has still managed to maintain a tight grip on the Internet sector. Poverty and economic disenchantment do not fully explain the results in Iran and therefore cannot be extrapolated to explain other case studies.

132 Rahimi 109.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Forced to choose between jumping on the information superhighway or languishing on the unwired byways of technology, many authoritarian regimes are embracing the Internet; in so doing however, the state has still managed to maintain strict control over media and information channels through regulation and ownership. While the Internet undoubtedly offers more multidirectional flow of information than other media and harbors extraordinary potential for the expression of citizen rights and human values, it would be naïve to suppose that this technical feature actually engenders the breaking down of information hierarchies and monopolies or that it can act as a replacement for social change or political reform. Information alone is simply not strong enough to establish democracy. The sheer availability of information or the existence of information channels cannot in themselves guarantee political involvement and activism; the impetus for political reform must arise from a population that will agitate for change and is loath to negotiate away its freedoms. The Internet may provide a forum for human rights and political activists to conspire and gather force but forecasts of a net-based autonomous group formation of the wider population at large appear bleak. At the moment, there is little indication that Internet forums are contributing to a greater degree of civil society in states which have managed to institute various mechanism of control. Thus far, states like China and Singapore have been successful in nurturing a technology-savvy populace at the same time that the political ramifications of this technology are tempered. This is not meant to discourage those hopeful for change in authoritarian regimes. Any assessment of
these states’ achievements is premised on the fact that a country like China has not experienced any major disruptions since the inception of the Internet. Should the economy falter dramatically in the future or should some unforeseen incident trigger major political commotion on a scale comparable to Tiananmen Square, the Internet will likely be the avenue through which agitation and dissent will gain momentum. And unlike the case of Tiananmen, this time round, the story will be impossible to contain as the country would learn of the brutality of which Beijing is capable. There is no doubt that civil society will continue to push the boundaries of permissive acts and test and re-negotiate the limits of toleration. For the time being, however, the continued relevance of nation-states even in an age of globalized media systems is a fact which can not be ignored.
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