

## In China, let a thousand blogs bloom

By *Suzanne Nossel*

China employs an army of censors. As many as 50,000 well-trained monitors police the Internet, and 12 government departments are empowered to search and seize information and shut down users and sites. They work fast: A recent study conducted by two American computer scientists found that 30 percent of banned posts are removed within half an hour of posting, and 90 percent within 24 hours.

International corporations must abide by the censors or forgo doing business in China. Paramount Pictures, for example, agreed in April to cut scenes from a new Brad Pitt movie to remove an unflattering reference to China. For those who do get unwanted messages out, punishments are harsh. A journalist who exposed shoddy school construction was sentenced to five years in jail. When former Independent Chinese PEN Center President Liu Xiaobo called for democratic reforms online, he was sentenced in 2009 to 11 years in jail. His courage earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, news of which was blocked in China.

Yet even China's elaborate system of speech control may be no match for the hundreds of millions of Chinese armed with cellphones and microblog accounts. Chinese writers have developed clever, low-tech ways to evade censors. When Kai-Fu Lee, the former head of Google in China and now a technology entrepreneur, posted an image of a tea set this year, his followers knew he'd been visited by authorities "for tea," a euphemism for interrogation. Chinese writers are now skilled at pressing the panic button; news of the latest avian flu outbreak got out before the censors could stop it and attracted more attention precisely because the government tried to hide it.

In February, Lee had a more direct response when he was banned from Chinese Twitter-style microblog sites for his criticisms of government censorship. He had more than 30 million followers on social media, millions more than President Obama. Cut off from his audience, Lee invited them to more hospitable territory: Twitter. "I've been silenced," he told his 1 million Twitter fans. "Everyone can come here to find me." And they did, provoking days of protest until the Chinese censors relented.

Ten years ago, much of that story would have been unimaginable. A business leader like Lee would not have been writing daily for a mass audience, especially not in China. There was no array of competing microblog platforms allowing him to evade the censors and alert the world. The global backlash from Lee's followers and the media would not have been swift and potent enough to lead the censors to back down so fast.

Yet while the technologies and tactics are new, Lee's cat-and-mouse game with Chinese censors is not. China has long been intolerant of dissent, brazen in silencing challengers and relentless in controlling the tools of expression. Lee and his government, like writers and officials in many authoritarian nations, are now locked in an arms race in which new digital tools and platforms for expression are being met with insidious techniques of surveillance and censorship. The future of free speech depends on ensuring that the voices of liberty win out over the machinery of suppression.

The landscape of free speech has been transformed in the last decade. Twitter has more than 500 million registered users, and Chinese sites collectively register more than 1 billion accounts.

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Social media and microblogging allow anyone with something to say to find an audience, even in some of the world's most repressive societies. And as barriers to entry fall for would-be writers, boundaries that separate writers from readers are also disintegrating.

However, as speech has mushroomed, so have strictures. Digital repression began in China nearly 20 years ago when the government identified the Internet as a threat to state power and national unity. Legislation in the mid-1990s barred transmission of information in nine broad categories, including attacks on the reputation of state institutions and activities that contravene the Chinese Constitution or laws. Later laws restricted online providers from operating without a state license or making available international news.

Caught in a race against new platforms and technologies, China's censorship may gradually collapse under its own weight. Surveillance slows Internet traffic, burdening the country's vast economic engine. Even pillars of the system are showing cracks. In late March, Zeng Li, a long-serving censorship official, wrote a deathbed apology for banning pieces he shouldn't have. "I don't want to be a sinner against history," he wrote.

Because of its ferocity, China's battle with unwanted speech will either embolden or inhibit censors in other authoritarian regimes. It may also dictate whether China lets dissent build under pressure or instead lets off steam, enabling its politics and society to evolve in response to public needs and demands.

For defenders of free speech, these high stakes mean that the fight against censorship in China must be a call to arms. Governments and international groups must support human rights defenders and free speech advocates. Corporations doing business in China must resist capitulation to censorship,

surveillance and government encroachment on personal freedoms. Ordinary citizens, online and off, must amplify the voices of Chinese writers and bloggers, transmitting their messages and demanding their freedom.

Only by siding with and arming the Chinese rebels will free speech win the day.

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### **ABOUT THE WRITER**

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