

## **Citizen Journalism in China: Advancing Liberty and Justice**

*Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.*

Thomas Jefferson,<sup>1</sup>

(Third President of the United States)

The internet has changed the manner in which news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Since the early nineteenth century, traditional mediums such as print and broadcast media had enforced a virtual monopolistic control over agenda-setting news.<sup>2</sup> Now with a simple click of a button anyone with a modest camera phone can produce and disseminate news.

But it is news consumption with the aid of social media which has made the internet revolutionary. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have amplified and enhanced the impact of the work done by citizen journalism. If traditional journalism's role is to enforce liberty and justice, then citizen journalism has certainly come of age. Indeed, the Arab Spring's outbreak, momentum and eventual success in Tunisia and Egypt were largely possible thanks to concerned citizens use of these technological tools to cut the chains of bondage. While in democratic countries the discussion is about how citizen journalism undermines traditional journalism, in authoritarian states is about how it accomplishes what the most powerful army in the world is unable to achieve.

This essay will focus on China, the epitome of the current tug of war between liberty and repression, as a case study to explore the role of social media and citizen journalism in accomplishing change towards higher levels of freedom and justice. The first part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson. 1791. "Letter to James Currie, January 28." *The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1. General Correspondence. 1651-1827 (Image 216 of 1213)*. Available at The Library of Congress <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib001765>

<sup>2</sup> Gillmor, Dan. 2004. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly. p. 4.

essay will explain this crucial symbiosis; this will be followed by outlining the positive changes that citizen journalism has advanced in China; and it will end by exposing the difficulties that citizen journalism still faces to succeed in its humanitarian role.

### **Citizen Journalism and the Social Media**

The origin of the term “citizen journalism” remains marred in mystery. There is some consensus, however, on that the term became part of the journalistic parlance after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.<sup>3</sup> This tragedy entered the world’s collective consciousness thanks to the first images, videos and tales that emanated from survivors, in many cases, just minutes after the dreadful event. Those images added a human depth to this tragedy that no news outlet could have accomplished; something similar occurred with the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that rocked Japan on March 2011.

What served to cement the importance of citizen journalism, however, was social media. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and other internet tools such as blogs, and even Wikileaks, have allowed citizen-generated news to be more conveniently disseminated and consumed. This consumption in the virtual world permits people to act decisively in the real world.

The natural symbiosis of citizen journalism with social media empowers citizens to shake up the status quo. It convinces them that their everyday struggles and problems are not only worthy news, but can be solved by cooperating with like-minded people. Democracy has traditionally provided that empowerment to its citizens but now citizen journalism can offer a similar impetus in authoritarian states.

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<sup>3</sup> Allan, Stuart. 2009. “Histories of Citizen Journalism.” In *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, p. 18.

## Changes in China

Citizen journalism with the help of social websites such as Weibo, China's version of Twitter with half of the nation's 420 million internet users,<sup>4</sup> has achieved great changes in society, professional media, and, most importantly, the government.

A growing sense of civilian duty among China's population is demonstrated by the high concern shown towards rampant corruption and injustices. Such objectives have been enhanced by collective efforts to expose corruption through what is known as "human flesh search engines."<sup>5</sup> Weibo users recently launched a search to identify a 20-year old woman who posted pictures in the microblogging website flaunting her riches and claiming to be the General Manager of the Red Cross Chamber of Commerce, an apparent subsidiary to the Red Cross Society of China, the nation's largest charity. The charity denied having such a subsidiary and were forced to report the case to the police.<sup>6</sup> The woman in question turned out to be the girlfriend of a high level executive of an organization linked to the charity.<sup>7</sup> Amid the public scrutiny the Red Cross Society of China revealed misusing public funds.<sup>8</sup> Due to the social media triggered-scandal donations to charitable organizations dropped nearly 90 percent compared to three months earlier.<sup>9</sup>

The professional media has found in citizen journalists and social media a double-edged sword. On the one hand, citizen journalists' posts to forums provide abundant leads to

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<sup>4</sup> China Internet Network Information Center. 2010. *Internet Fundamental Data, 2010*. Web site [cited September 3, 2011]. Available at <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/en/index/00/index.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Deibert, Ronald., Palfrey, John., Rohozinski, Rafal., and Zittrain, Jonathan., eds. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 412.

<sup>6</sup> Wong, Edward. 2011. "An Online Scandal Underscores Chinese Distrust of State Charities." *New York Times*, July 3 [cited August 30, 2011]. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/04/world/asia/04china.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>7</sup> Li, Raymond. 2011. "Executive Quits Over Red Cross Row Girlfriend." *South China Morning Post*, July 5.

<sup>8</sup> Li, Raymond. 2011. "Red Cross Admits it Misused Public Funds." *South China Morning Post*, June 29.

<sup>9</sup> Sun, Yuanqing. 2011. "Donations to Charities Slump Amid Trust Crisis." *China Daily*, August 26 [cited August 30, 2011]. Available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/china/2011-08/26/content\\_13200839.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/china/2011-08/26/content_13200839.htm)

a variety of stories. On the other hand, social media doubles as an independent media watchdog, which in China is nonexistent. These forums would pressure traditional media to report on previously vetted stories indirectly, by generating high level of activity, or directly, by criticizing mediocre or bias reporting. Even global media outlets are not exempted from this implacable scrutiny. The website [www.anti-cnn.com](http://www.anti-cnn.com) was established by a Chinese university student as a reaction to the perceived bias and distortions in Western media towards China's handling of the 2008 unrests in Tibet, just weeks before the Olympic Games.<sup>10</sup> CNN even responded formally to evidence illustrating careless picture cropping and inaccurate captions.<sup>11</sup> At its peak the website received 500,000 visits per day, 60 percent from outside China.<sup>12</sup>

These developments have pressured local and the central government in Beijing to act upon incidents reported by citizen journalists. In August 2011, Weibo users instigated a protest demanding the closure of a chemical plant located in the Northeast port city of Dalian because of a toxic spill scare after heavy rains damaged safety barriers along the plant. After 12,000 protesters clashed with police the government decided to shut down the plant and move it from the area.<sup>13</sup> These not-in-my-backyard type of protests are rare in China, but are becoming more common thanks to social media's power of congregation. Moreover, due to the high interest generated by the anti-CNN website Beijing was pressured to publicly denounce Western media's bias reporting. In explaining this unexpected action a high government official remarked, "The people on the Internet weren't just criticizing the bias of

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<sup>10</sup> Latham, Kevin. 2009. "Media, the Olympics and the Search for the "Real China." *The China Quarterly* 197 (March): 28.

<sup>11</sup> "CNN Statement on Tibet Coverage." 2008. *CNN*, March 28 [cited September 5, 2011]. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/US/03/28/tibet.statement/>

<sup>12</sup> Reese, D. Stephen., and Jia Dai. 2009. "Citizen Journalism in the Global News Arena: China's New Media Critics." In *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, p. 225.

<sup>13</sup> Wee, Sui-Lee. 2011. "China Says Will Shut Plants as Thousands Protest." *Reuters*. August 14 [cited September 2, 2011]. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/14/us-china-protests-idUSTR77D0EK20110814>

the Western media; they were criticizing us [the Chinese government] for allowing it.”<sup>14</sup> Although when these actions seriously threaten the central government’s grip on power some sophisticated actions are taken to placate these alleged subversive elements.

### **Limitations in China**

Indeed, efforts to replicate the successful North African uprisings in Chinese cities failed.<sup>15</sup> This was due to a mixture of public aversion to disrupting the economic policies,<sup>16</sup> which lifted over a half of a billion people out of poverty in one generation,<sup>17</sup> and the government’s actions to thwart this and other attempts to subvert the Communist Party’s six-decade old grip on power.

China has one of the most advanced controls over traditional media. The government strictly controls what the media can cover and how. But after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 government officials learned about the benefits of transparency in reporting and began giving more editorial independence to the media.<sup>18</sup> This relative independence was evident after the bullet train crash on July 2011 where at least 40 people died.<sup>19</sup> Broadcast and print media exercised open and bold reporting on the crash’s causes and the government’s unsatisfactory rescue efforts. Frustration and anger in the social media mounted over rescue efforts when an infant was found alive 21 hours after the crash by a firefighter who disobeyed official orders

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<sup>14</sup> Shirk, L. Susan. 2011. “Changing Media, Changing Foreign Policy.” In *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 247.

<sup>15</sup> Bremmer, Ian. 2011. “The Revolution will not be searchable.” *Foreign Policy*. March 1 [cited September 4, 2011]. Available at [http://eurasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/01/the\\_revolution\\_will\\_not\\_be\\_searchable](http://eurasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/01/the_revolution_will_not_be_searchable)

<sup>16</sup> Lu, Yiyi. 2011. “China’s Middle Class: Mobilizing for Political Action?” *The Wall Street Journal*. August 24 [cited September 3]. Available at <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/08/24/china%E2%80%99s-middle-class-mobilizing-for-political-action/>

<sup>17</sup> World Bank. 2011. *China Overview*. [cited September 2, 2011]. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

<sup>18</sup> Deibert, Ronald., Palfrey, John., Rohozinski, Rafal., and Zittrain, Jonathan., eds. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p. 452.

<sup>19</sup> Clem, Will. 2011. “Crash ‘Exposes Rail Ministry Safety Failings.’” *South China Morning Post*, August 5.

to stop looking for survivors issued a few hours earlier.<sup>20</sup> As a result the Propaganda Department sent a directive to professional media instructing them to stop publishing critical stories that were undermining the official narrative and rather write “positive news.”<sup>21</sup> This was even after China’s Prime Minister vowed to pursue the causes of the crash in an “open and transparent” manner.<sup>22</sup>

Beijing’s control over the internet is even more comprehensive. It includes government directives, human censors, internet companies’ self-censorship and one of the most technologically sophisticated systems to control the internet known as “The Great Firewall of China.”<sup>23</sup> This technology filters all internet traffic into and out of China through a few purposely designed backbone networks that allow the government to block content on demand.<sup>24</sup>

The two-year old Weibo, however, has proven to be a more difficult social media to reign. Recently, Beijing directed the company operating the microblogging website to suspend accounts that were spreading rumors.<sup>25</sup> It is undeniable that malicious information undermines citizen journalism, but the fact that the government determines what constitutes rumors evidences a political reason for the directive. In times of high crisis, however, any individual deemed to pose a threat to the Communist Party would be immediately jailed, as occurred after the outbreak of the Arab Spring,<sup>26</sup> or the government may even switch off the internet for months.

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<sup>20</sup> Clem, Will. 2011. “Toddler Plucked from Wreckage.” *South China Morning Post*, July 25.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, Stephen. 2011. “Censors Slap Ban on Crash Coverage.” *South China Morning Post*, July 31.

<sup>22</sup> Wines, Michael. 2011. “China’s Premier Seeks Reforms and Relevance.” *New York Times*. August 7 [cited September 10, 2011]. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/world/asia/08china.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>23</sup> Nip, Y. M. Joyce. 2009. “Citizen Journalism in China: The Case of the Wenchuan Earthquake.” In *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> Tai, Zixue. 2006. *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. Routledge: New York. p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Wines, Michael., and Sharon LaFraniere. 2011. “Chinese Protest Suspensions of Bloggers.” *New York Times*. August 26 [cited August 30]. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/27/world/asia/27weibo.html>

<sup>26</sup> Wong, Edward. 2011. “Human Rights Advocates Vanish as China Intensifies Crackdown.” *The New York Times*. March 11 [cited September 4, 2011]. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/12/world/asia/12china.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/12/world/asia/12china.html?_r=1)

## **Conclusion**

Completely blocking the internet, however, is an isolated case occurring in a remote area. The internet with all its information and communication technologies has opened new frontiers to economic development that the Chinese government could not forego. Although the inroads made in China cannot be compared yet with recent developments in North Africa, there has been invaluable progress amid draconian measures by the authorities. The freedom of the press in China is nonexistent, but Thomas Jefferson would admire the role that citizen journalism and social media are playing in slowly but steadily bringing liberty and justice to a deserving civilization.