Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

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It is tempting to celebrate the emergence of the Internet as the dawn of a new era, promising possibilities for political change, civic participation, and obliteration of traditional geographical confines. More specifically, the rise of new technologies is often heralded as breaking open regimes that do not live up to the hegemonic ideologies of democracy and capitalism. Jeroen de Kloet reveals the two interlocking narratives which continue to preoccupy Western academic and popular discourse on the Internet in China.

King Kong in China

The first of these narratives regards stories related to online protest, which at times triggers offline protests. For example, the protest in the summer of 2007 against the building of a chemical factory in Xiamen was generally perceived as a consequence of protest postings by blogger Zuola. The second story is related to issues of censorship and digital human rights. According to Frank Patchin, they will be the most popular, if not worn out, metaphor mobilised to point to the assumed omnipotence of the government.

Lokman Tsui has rightly observed that such a metaphor builds on a cold war rhetoric in which China is positioned as the constitutive outside of ‘the free, open and democratic West.’ His observation resonates with what literary critic Rey Chow refers to as the King Kong syndrome, ‘producing “China” as a spectacular primitive monster whose despoticism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders.’ Indeed, the metaphor running through these two interlocking narratives concerning Internet in China is precisely the urgent need to expose, discipline and punish this monster, to tame it, hopefully, to the world of ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ societies. Not surprisingly, what is being played out in the Chinese cyberspace is more messy, and thus more ambivalent than such narratives want us to believe. Rather than taking a clear position, I want to explore this messy digital domain.

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American White House, he explains: ‘Those .gov and .mil sites are always our targets. For the White House site, we have spent most of our time to find the loopholes.’ The attention they get is much to the dismay of hackers like Goodwell, a Beijing-based hacker who looks down upon ‘scriptkiddies’ like Sharpwinner who simply copy codes to hack other sites. ‘I think [the hacking war between China and Japan and the US] is just awkward and boring. The real hackers have no sense of boundaries, they have nothing to do with politics, politics should never infect technology.’ To Goodwell and his friends, the spirit of hacking revolves around curiosity: ‘As a hacker, I think you should never give up, you should always study on, whether you fail or succeed, so as to develop new technologies.’ While relentless curiosity should be a driving force that fuels hackings cultures, China, in the view of Goodwell, is a bad place for hackers: ‘In America, hackers may have their own culture and ideology, in China people have no sense of hacking culture and ideology. In China, you first need to secure your income. (...) Chinese have no sense of cooperation, no team spirit, if they developed a certain program or system, they may share it. Following Sharpwinner and Goodwell, it seems that the grey hacking zone in China is criss-crossed with fault lines of (apolitical) longings as well as (un)willingness to share and cooperate. The lack of shared cultural practices makes it, indeed, difficult to speak of a hacker culture in China, a stark contrast to my research experience in New York among the hacker communities there, where sharing (manifest, among others, in their meeting places, conferences and gatherings) was largely the norm.

King Kong reconsidered

What, then, can we learn from these observations on bloggers and hackers? Let me return to the King Kong syndrome, which continues to be a monster to be tamed and brought to the civilized world. What we eventually witness, at least in King Kong films, is buildings crumbling, windows smashed to pieces, and the order of the day radically disrupted before the primitive monster ends up being killed by modern weaponry. I will therefore make two appeals from this brief account of Internet in China. First, such chaos and fragmentation that King Kong brings with it is precisely what we need to acknowledge and accept when we try to make sense of China and its Internet. Too often, accounts on Chinese Internet communities are driven by an agenda that is drenched in a cold war rhetoric that will not bring us very far. Second, the death of King Kong should force us to rethink narratives of civilisation, and the hegemonic mantra of ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘human rights.’ The problem is the lack of reflection upon the production of knowledge over China and its intricate relation to power and ideology. The basic Foucauldian (and Said-ian) question of why should force us to rethink narratives of civilisation, and the he-

References

Chow, Rey. ‘King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the “Handover,”’ from the USA,’ Social Text 35 (Summer 1998)


On the black prison story, see: http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/10/17/china-co-operation-20-on-beijings-black-jails/

Bloggers

(from left to right): Michael Anti, Zuola and Wang Xiaofeng.