Chapter 53

Real-Name Registration Regulation in China:
An Examination of Chinese Netizens' Discussions About Censorship, Privacy, and Political Freedom

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ABSTRACT

On February 4, 2015, China announced its new regulations that require all Chinese Internet users to register with their real names. The heightened control of Internet clearly demonstrates Chinese government's concerns over increasing social unrests and the abilities of Chinese Internet users to access information not censored by the government. However, the real-name registration regime has posed the greatest challenge to the anonymity of the Internet that many Chinese users have valued in an authoritarian society. Furthermore, the real-name registration system also impinges on Chinese Internet users' privacy, political freedom, and freedom of speech. This book chapter analyzes microblog discussions to examine existing Chinese censorship and control systems on the Internet, to investigate government's rhetoric to justify its censorship and control systems, and to identify major themes in Chinese netizens' reactions and discourses.

INTRODUCTION

Internet and Social Media Landscape in China

[N]ew ICTs will significantly erode the ability of the CCP-led government in China to maintain their hegemonic hold on the people and the region. (Mbaku & Yu, 2013, p. 14)

According to Chinese Internet Network Information Center (2014), China had 632 million Internet users by the end of June 2014. Mobile Internet users in China have reached 527 million, which accounts for 83.4% of the Internet users (Chinese Internet Network Information Center, 2014). By the end of the same survey period, China had a total of 2.73 million websites in China (Chinese Internet Network Information Center, 2014). Among many emerging Internet applications, social media represent one of the most noteworthy phenomena. By the end of June 2014, social media users in China had reached 257 million (Chinese Internet Network Information Center, 2014). Social media landscape in China has been described as "one of the most unique, fragmented and dynamic in the world" (Flemming, 2015, para 1). Social media in China have offered users with a wide variety of functionalities, ranging from auto, beauty, cooking, education, fashion, finance, to sports, delivered through various platforms (Flemming, 2015). Converging applications range from mobile social media app, *WeChat*, Twitter-like *Weibo*, Instagram-like *Nice*, Facebook-type news feed *Moments*, *Taobao* for e-commerce, and many others.

Among many social media platforms in China, Twitter-like *Weibo*, meaning microblog in Chinese, is one of the most important information-communication technologies (ICTs) and has been widely studied by practitioners and scholars to assess its potential impacts on the political life of Chinese netizens (Hassid, 2012; Huang & Su, 2013; Jiang & Schlæger, 2014; Sandoval, 2009; Sullivan, 2012, 2014; *The Economist,* 2012; Voice of America, 2012). The rapid rise of *Weibo* (such as *Sina Weibo* and *Tencent Weibo*) can be contributed to its technical capabilities to distribute information quickly (Li & Rao, 2010) and to challenge reports from government-controlled mainstream media (Ramzy, 2011/2/17). Such abilities to bypass government censorship have been demonstrated in its role in news reporting and victim assistance in 2008 Sichuan Earthquake (Li & Rao, 2010), in ensuring transparency in the handling of the High-Speed Rail Collision Accident in Wenzhou (July 23, 2011) (Fukuyama, 2012), and in questioning government's handling of a recent cruise sinking accident in Yangtze River (Dalje, 2015). While the government-controlled mass media and censored *Weibo* contents in *Sina Weibo* have praised Premier Keqiang Li's "'strong' hands-on leadership" (Blanc, 2015; Dalje, 2015, para. 4), uncensored comments retrieved by *Free Weibo*, a censorship monitoring website, question government's failed safety measures to prevent the accident.

Civil Unrest in China

The World Bank (2012) predicts that China has the potential to become a creative, harmonious, modern high-income society by 2030. However, in order to accomplish these objectives, China needs to modify its current development strategies (The World Bank, 2012). After decades of two-digit economic growth, China's GDP only grew at 9.3% (in 2011), 7.7% (in 2012), and 7.7% (in 2013) (The World Bank, 2015; Zhu, 2012). China's GDP target is expected to be around 7% in 2015 (Anderlini, 2015). In a compiled website of major economic forecasting organizations and firms, China's GDP growth is expected to go down to 6.0% in 2018 (Economist Intelligence Unit Forecast), 6.1% in 2018 (International Monetary Fund Forecast), or 5.8% (OECD Long-term Forecast) (Lapitskiy, 2015).

The stellar economic growth has caused severe impacts on almost every aspect of China's society, despite the optimistic prediction that China actually is the world's largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (Anderlini, 2015). For example, environmental problems are said to have global implications, in spite of their local characteristics (Yang, 2015). Some of the problems include air and water pollution, desertification, and erosion (Yang, 2015). A report by The World Bank (2007) found that health costs

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