Chapter 11

Government Monitoring of Online Media and Its Influence on Netizens' Language Use in China

Wengao Gong
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

In the last 15 years, China has witnessed the world's fastest growth in terms of Internet infrastructure construction and number of Internet users. In order to realize its ambition in maximizing the economic value of the Internet while minimizing its destabilizing and disruptive potential, the Chinese government has adopted a policy that encourages the technological development of the Chinese Internet. The government, however, also maintains a very tight control over the Chinese people's online activities. In order to avoid or break through the government's regulatory effort, netizens in China have worked out many interesting ways of expressing ideas online. Among the various linguistic strategies adopted by Chinese netizens, five are particularly prominent and arguably more effective. They are using homophony, dismantling Chinese characters, using sarcasm, extending the semantic sense of words, and using English or Pinyin initials. This chapter examines how government monitoring of online media in China is employed to restrict people's freedom of expression and how Chinese netizens are using certain features inherent in their language and culture to exercise their right of free expression in such a context.

INTRODUCTION

China is often criticized by Western powers for its close control over its people's freedom of expression. However, with the increasing penetration of the Internet into Chinese people's daily lives, it is getting increasingly difficult for the Chinese government to maintain the kind of control it exercised during the pre-Internet years. The anonymous nature of online communication (especially blogs and forums) and the fast speed of information dissemination have gradually turned China's online media into an invisible "battlefield" between the Chinese government and the Chinese netizens (i.e. individuals communicating online) –especially when it comes to sensitive political issues or cultural taboos. At present, the government of the People's Republic of China is trying every means possible to monitor the flow of information in Chinese society whereas Chinese citizens are simultaneously trying to find any and every means possible for expressing their own opinions.

As text is still the major means of opinion expression in online context in China, and as the government's general approach to content censorship involves key-word filtering/blockage, the game between the Chinese government and Chinese netizens has been largely turned into a linguistic one. In order to avoid or circumvent the government's content censorship, netizens in China have devised many innovative ways of expressing ideas online. By examining linguistic phenomenon in online communication in the People's Republic of China, the author explores the socio-political conflicts incurred by the popularity of online media in China and examines how these conflicts are verbalized in Chinese discourse via online media.

THE INTERNET, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, AND MONITORING

When the Internet was first invented, its primary function was to facilitate information sharing free from the constraints of time and geographic location. Many people believe that "cyberspace has no territorially based boundaries" (Johnson & Post, 1997, p. 6). This seemingly borderless nature of the cyberspace created by the Internet and the World Wide Web has fired many people's imaginations about what changes this new technology would bring. Terms like "free access of information," "freedom of speech," and "democratization of information" soon became buzzwords in news media and academic writings alike. Many scholars (e.g., Friedman, 2000) and politicians hailed the Internet as an ideal tool for promoting democracy and free access of information, especially in countries often labeled as "authoritarian" or "totalitarian" regimes. Within this context, Friedman (2000, p. 62) describes the Internet as "the pinnacle of the democratization of information" because it is totally decentralized, it is owned by no one, and it cannot be turned off.

This Web-based democratization of information, according to Friedman (2000), could render repressive regimes powerless, and the trend to test this claim is often irresistible. Friedman argues that authoritarian regimes could not afford to refuse Internet technology; otherwise they would fall economically behind the nations that adopted it. Once authoritarian states embrace such technology, however, they will not be able to control information as they had previously because it is virtually impossible to control what people are doing online.

Wacker (2003) expresses similar sentiments about the power of the Internet in confronting government regulation and control. According to him,

the global nature of the Internet, the wide geographic distribution of its users, and the diverse

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