

THE RISE OF INTERNET ACTIVISTS IN CHINA

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Executive Summary

1. As of December 2007, China had 210 million internet users, replacing the US as the world's number one in internet user count. The rapidly growing number of internet users in China provided the consumer basis for an internet economy and the social basis for internet activism.
2. Even Chinese President Hu Jintao went online to chat with internet users on June 20, 2008, a symbolic gesture showing that China's central leadership attaches great importance to internet public opinion.
3. Hu Jintao said during the chat, "I have to make time to go online, although I can't surf the Web every day due to my busy workload.... I log on to view domestic and foreign news, to learn of people's interest, and to solicit their advice and opinion about the work of our government and Party."
4. Internet activism refers to the use of the internet for social and political activism. It takes both moderate and radical forms. The radical forms amount to popular protest. Protests are typically initiated in electronic bulletin boards and online communities. In some cases, the internet is used to mobilize street demonstrations.
5. Major cases of internet activism are concerned with three issues – the rights of disadvantaged groups, corruption, and popular nationalism. The more influential cases generated publicity through the mass media, attracting the attention of central government leaders, and leading to policy change.
6. Internet activism is a source of public opinion and a new form of citizen mobilization. It undermines information control and creates social pressure for more government transparency and public participation
7. Internet activism is rooted in two social conditions. One is citizens' grievances about the negative consequences of market transformation, such as social

polarity, rampant corruption, lack of protection of citizens' rights, and environmental degradation.

8. The other social condition is the development of civil society groups. These civic groups actively use the internet for information sharing, public education, organizing events, and mobilization.
9. There is an economic logic to internet activism. Internet protests often generate high volumes of web traffic, an indicator of the success of web sites. Thus commercial web sites encourage users to participate in contentious activities.
10. Chinese internet users are active and prolific content-producers. According to a national survey published in January 2008, about 66 percent of China's 210 million internet users had contributed contents to the internet.
11. Over 35 percent of respondents indicated that in the past six months, they had either posted messages or responded to messages in online forums. About 32 percent had uploaded pictures and 18 percent had uploaded films, television programs, and other video materials
12. Government control of the internet is only partially effective. The Chinese leadership has its own ambivalence. It continues to promote the prosperity of the internet economy though it faces challenges from internet users.
13. The current wave of internet protests will not subside until the serious social and environmental problems associated with China's market transformation are dealt with.
14. Recalling the destructive aspects of Red Guard populism during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, both foreign observers and some Chinese intellectuals have expressed concerns about the populist trend of China's internet-savvy activists. Although internet populism has had more positive than negative social impact so far, it is nonetheless a growing trend that merits serious attention.

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YANG Guobin^{*}

The Growing Impact of Internet Activism in China

- 1.1 The recent wave of online nationalism in China proves yet again the power of the internet for social mobilization and popular contention. In April and May 2008, the anti-CNN protests and the campaign to boycott French supermarket chain store Carrefour produced international reverberations. Inside China, protest activities took place both online and in the streets of several major cities. Many people used the internet to challenge the Western media's portrayal of the riots in the Tibetan regions and to mobilize street demonstrations. These events highlighted the growing impact of internet activism in China.
- 1.2 Internet activism is a new form of popular contention related to the use of the internet. In some cases, the internet is used to mobilize street protest. At other times, protest takes place online in symbolic forms -- through language, images, and sounds. Internet activism first appeared in China in the late 1990s. Since then, it has become more frequent and more influential. Major social crises are often accompanied by some form of internet activism. For example, following the devastating earthquake in Sichuan province on May 12, 2008, many Chinese internet users, or netizens (网民), questioned whether the flattened hospitals and school buildings in the earthquake zone were built in accordance with the anti-earthquake standards issued by China's Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development.

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- 1.3 With growing frequency, internet activism has become politically influential. Some cases exposed corrupt government officials. Others led to policy change. Still others expressed citizens' protests against social injustices. For these reasons, internet activism has become an important new social force.
- 1.4 Although the Chinese government does not like any form of protest activity to expand beyond control, it is ambivalent about controlling spontaneous forms of online protests on critical social issues as these protests reflect general public sentiments. In fact, government authorities are increasingly turning to the internet to gauge public opinion and to launch new initiatives to proactively guide and shape online public opinion.¹
- 1.5 Internet activism reflects social problems and often responds in real-time to social crises. It serves as an important window into broader social and political trends in China. For this reason, foreign policy makers, global business communities, and international media professionals have stepped up efforts to monitor activities on the Chinese internet.
- 1.6 Internet activism has become an important agent of social change, if not political reform. Chinese citizens increasingly rely on the internet for public communication, organization, and mobilization. Internet activism has helped to open up the mass media and the Chinese government.
- 1.7 Chinese citizens will continue to use the internet and other new communication technologies to articulate and defend their interests and rights. Until such problems as social injustice, poverty, corruption, abuse of power, and environmental degradation are adequately dealt with will the current wave of internet protests subside.

¹ Even Chinese President Hu Jintao went online to chat with internet users on June 20, 2008, a symbolic gesture showing that China's central leadership attaches great importance to internet public opinion.

Hu Jintao said during the chat, "I have to make time to go online, although I can't surf the Web every day due to my busy workload.... I log on to view domestic and foreign news, to learn of people's interest, and to solicit their advice and opinion about the work of our government and Party." "Hu makes history with online chat", *China Daily* (June 21-22, 2008).

Internet Developments in China

- 2.1 The rapid development of the internet in China provides the basic condition for internet activism. China was connected to the internet in 1994. In 1997, there were 670,000 internet users. By December 2007, China had 210 million internet users, replacing the US as the world's number one in internet user count.

TABLE 1 INTERNET USERS IN CHINA, 1997-2007

1997	670,000
1998	2,100,000
1999	8,900,000
2000	22,500,000
2001	33,700,000
2002	59,100,000
2003	79,500,000
2004	94,000,000
2005	111,000,000
2006	137,000,000
2007	210,000,000

Source: www.cnnic.net.cn

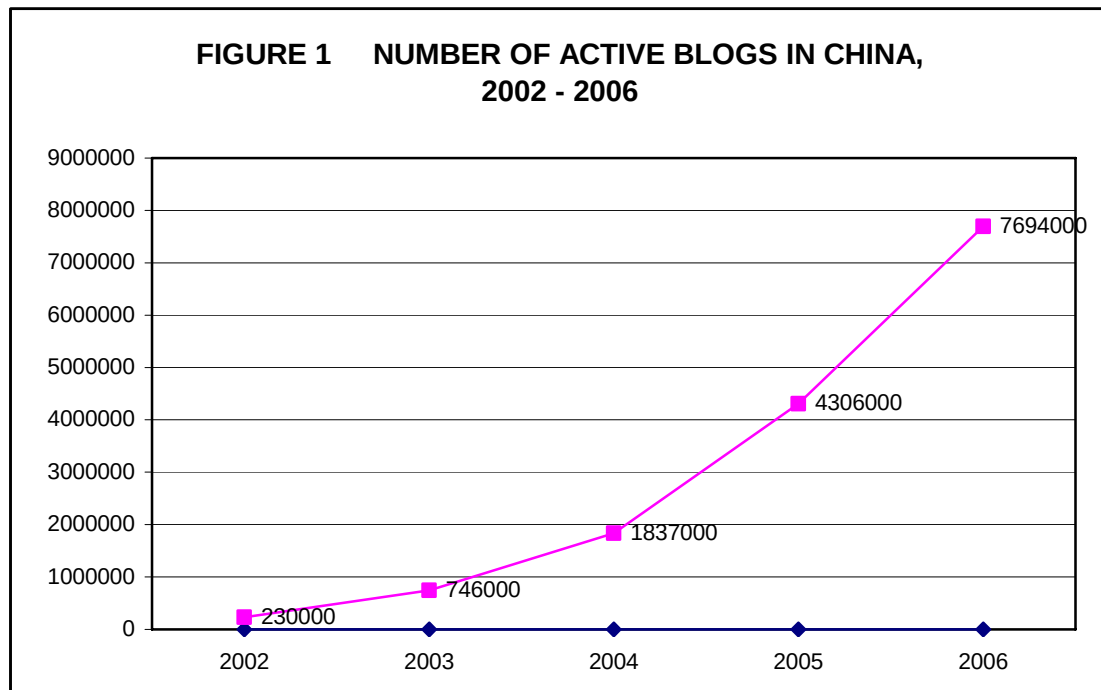
- 2.2 Of the 210 million internet users in 2007, close to 43 percent were women. In terms of age, the largest proportion falls between 18 and 24, whereas those above the age of 50 comprise only four percent.

**TABLE 2 CHINESE INTERNET USERS BY AGE, DECEMBER 2007
(IN PERCENT)**

Age Group	%
Below 18	19
18-24	31
25-30	18
31-35	11
36-40	8
41-50	8
Above 50	4

Source: www.cnnic.net

2.3 Major new developments in recent years include the rapid expansion of short text messaging, broadband, and blogs. In June 2007, over 75 percent of Chinese internet users were using broadband access and over 34 percent were using wireless or mobile phone access. There were about 230,000 active blogs in 2002. This number increased to over 7.6 million in 2006 (Figure 1).²



2.4 With the development of the internet, a lively Chinese internet culture soon developed. This is an expressive and participatory culture. Expressive behavior on the internet encompasses intellectual and political discussions as well as personal expression and social interaction. This expressive culture drives the more contentious side of Chinese internet politics.

Internet Regulation and Control

3.1 State control of the internet has evolved in tandem with internet activism. In the late 1990s, the internet was under-developed in China. The use of the internet for social or political activism was negligible. Although the Chinese

² China Internet Network Information Center, which conducted the survey, defines an active blog as one that is updated at least once a month on average.

government issued major regulations about computer network security in 1994 and 1997, the control of interactive functions such as electronic bulletin boards tightened only after 2000. In October 2000, the then Ministry of Information Industry announced regulations to manage electronic bulletin boards. In November 2000, the State Council issued regulations about the provision of news services online. Commercial web sites can only reprint news items from official news agencies and are prohibited from independently producing news. This requirement remains in effect today.

- 3.2 In the past five or six years, Chinese governmental control of the internet has tightened. The main targets of control are subversive activities and internet pornography. The forms of control include both coercive measures such as periodic crackdowns and use of technological means such as internet blocking and filtering. These measures have only been partially effective. Large-scale spontaneous internet protests have continued to take place. Resistance to control is common. Citizens have devised many ways of bypassing internet filters and accessing blocked web sites through proxy servers.
- 3.3 On the other hand, the Chinese leadership is ambivalent about control. Many of the issues in internet protests, such as citizen rights protection and official corruption, are problems that government leaders wish to resolve as much as citizens. It is in no one's interest to block these channels of public expression. Yet at the same time, the government worries about the possibility of an internet protest getting out of control and spilling over into the streets. The Chinese government continues to promote the prosperity of the internet economy as it understands that excessive control of the internet may harm the new economy.
- 3.4 Since 2004, the Chinese government has adjusted its strategies of control. The use of legal instruments rather than administrative measures is emphasised. A media campaign was launched to promote the ethical use of the internet. In 2004, the government set up an official web site for citizens to report illegal internet behavior. At the same time, the government is putting more resources into promoting government-sponsored web sites.

Characteristics of Internet Activism in China

- 4.1 In the first few years of internet diffusion in China, there were only scattered reports of internet protests. In 1996, Chinese college students used online bulletin boards to protest against Japan's control of the Diaoyu Islands, islands which China has long had territorial claim to. In 1998, internet users in China joined Chinese diaspora from New York to Amsterdam in protests against violence committed against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.
- 4.2 A defining case of internet activism was the protests in 1999 against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in the former Yugoslavia. After the embassy bombing, *People's Daily Online* set up a bulletin board called "Protest Forum" for internet users to air discontent. Tens of thousands of comments were posted within days. The launching of the "Protest Forum" unintentionally popularized online protest activities when the internet was just beginning to catch on in China. Since then, internet protests have become more and more common.
- 4.3 An influential case in recent years concerns the death of Sun Zhigang. A college graduate, Sun was beaten to death on 20 March 2003 while in police custody in Guangzhou. Lacking a temporary resident permit, Sun had been taken into custody three days earlier as a vagrant. After the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported Sun's death, an outraged public filled the web with protest. Citizens demanded punishment of the culprits. Legal scholars called for an official review of the outdated "Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars." As a result, suspects involved in Sun Zhigang's death were charged and convicted and the government revoked the above-mentioned "Measures."
- 4.4 Three issues have been especially prominent in internet activism. One is popular nationalism. Examples include the protests against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in former Yugoslavia in 1999, several cases of anti-Japanese protests in 2001 and 2005, and the recent anti-CNN protests.

- 4.5 The second issue concerns rights protection (维权), especially the rights of disadvantaged social groups (弱势群体). Besides the “Sun Zhigang Incident,” other examples include protests against the cover-up of a mine accident in 2001 in Guangxi province (the accident killed 81 miners). Another example is the “black kiln case.” In July 2007, detailed information about young children kidnapped and forced into slave labor in the illegal brick kilns in Shanxi province was revealed on the internet. The scandal led to widespread internet protests, mass media coverage, and the intervention of central government authorities.
- 4.6 The third targets social injustices committed by the wealthy and the powerful. For example, in October 2003, a wealthy woman ran over and killed a peasant woman with her BMW automobile in the city of Harbin. Chinese netizens poured sympathy for the victim and demanded the criminal prosecution of the automobile driver. In another case, a municipal party secretary in Shenzhen was forced to make public apologies in November 2004 after Chinese netizens exposed his abuse of his official position to promote his daughter’s film.

Forms of Internet Activism

- 5.1 Internet activism has both radical and moderate forms. The more radical cases involve the hacking of web sites and the mobilization of street demonstrations. These are most likely to happen in nationalistic protests. Setting up campaign web sites, online signature petitions, and verbal protests in electronic bulletin boards are some of the moderate forms. Chinese internet activism has relied mainly on moderate forms.
- 5.2 One form of internet activism is web sites devoted to rights protection (网络维权). For example, there are numerous web sites for the protection of consumer rights. Some of these are set up by consumer rights associations, others by individual activists. In addition, many web sites specialize in exposing corruption or providing legal aid for women, children, and migrant workers.

- 5.3 Disasters and incidents of social injustice often provoke spontaneous protests on the internet. The protests involving disadvantaged social groups mentioned earlier are examples. Organized internet activism may take a variety of forms. Some cases do not have identifiable leaders. For example, in 2007, residents in the city of Xiamen successfully organized a street demonstration to oppose the construction of a chemical factory. Many residents showed up for the demonstration because they had received a text-message announcement.
- 5.4 Other cases of internet activism are organized by citizen groups and local communities. For example, in recent years, urban homeowners have found the internet to be an effective tool for organized efforts to defend their property rights. Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have often used the internet to organize environmental campaigns.

Social Conditions of Internet Activism

- 6.1 Internet activism is enabled by not just technology, but social conditions. Social protests of all kinds have been on the rise in China.³ These range from protests about land loss to pension, property rights, consumer rights, popular nationalism, pollution, and so forth. Internet activism is part of this larger mosaic. Online and offline contention share some common themes. The issues at the center of internet activism, especially those concerning rights of disadvantaged groups, also feature prominently in street protests. These protests reflect Chinese people's resistance to the negative impact of economic transformation, especially social polarity, environmental degradation, and rampant corruption.
- 6.2 Internet nationalism is related to different aspects of China's transformation. Its core participants are young people. For example, computer hackers who attack Japanese or American web sites during nationalistic protests are mostly college-age students. These young people were born after the economic reform started. Their coming-of-age accompanies the rise of China. At the same time,

³ Andrew G. Walder and Zhao Litao, "China's Social Protests: Political Threat or Growing Pains?" EAI Background Brief No. 357, 6 November, 2007.

they have not had any experience of mass political participation. Online activism thus reflects not only their national pride, but also their desire for collective participation.

6.3 Another social development related to internet activism is the proliferation of civil society groups in China. Civil society groups flourished in the 1980s and then declined after the repression of student protests in 1989. Since the mid-1990s, however, civil society groups have not only revived, but gained new degrees of autonomy. Officially registered civic organizations numbered 360,000 at the end of 2006, although estimates put the actual numbers at about three million.⁴ These provide the organizational basis for all forms of citizen activism, including internet activism.

6.4 As in other countries, Chinese civil society groups actively use the internet for information sharing, public education, organizing events, and mobilization. A published survey of 129 such organizations in 2003 shows that 106 of them (or 82 percent) were connected to the internet and 69 (65 percent) had web sites.⁵ The growing connectivity of these civic groups facilitates their activities. Environmental NGOs are among the most creative in the use of the internet. They often combine internet campaigns with other forms of action to promote public participation in environmental protection

The Economic Logic of Internet Activism

7.1 Somewhat surprisingly, internet activism has a business dimension. Internet protests often generate high volumes of web traffic, an indicator of the success of web sites. Thus web sites encourage users to participate in debates and other contentious activities. Some web sites strategically guide and promote

⁴ Gao Bingzhong and Yuan Ruijun, "Introduction: Stepping into Civil Society." In Beijing University Civil Society Research Center. *Zhongguo gongmin shehui fazhan lanpi shu* (*Blue Book of Civil Society Development in China*). Beijing: Beijing University Press, forthcoming.

⁵ Guobin Yang, "How Do Chinese Civic Associations Respond to the Internet: Findings from a Survey." *The China Quarterly* No. 189 (2007), pp. 122-143.

controversial discussions in their online communities in order to pump up web traffic.

- 7.2 There is thus a synergy between internet activism and web business. Two logics are at work here. One is the logic of the economics of attention. Web sites attract users by attracting their attention. Chinese internet users pay more attention to the social functions of the internet than to commercial functions. Surveys published by the China Internet Network Information Center show that far more people use the internet for social interaction than for commercial activities such as online shopping. For example, in June 2007, close to 70 percent of Chinese internet users reported using bulletin boards or online communities; less than twenty percent shopped online.⁶ Because social interaction takes place in online forums and online communities, developing these social functions becomes a priority for commercial web sites. The largest online communities in China have registered users in the millions, with thousands of postings daily. When contentious issues are brought up, the number of postings often increases dramatically, thus significantly increasing web traffic.
- 7.3 The other logic is that of social production. Internet consumers are different from regular consumers who buy products from the market. They are producers as well. They produce contents when they post messages in online forums, write blogs, upload youtube videos, or protest online. The contents they produced are viewed by others and may circulate widely. These are essential for maintaining web traffic and for keeping the web sites going. In this sense, internet business is essentially a business for social production.
- 7.4 Chinese internet users are active and prolific content-producers. According to a national survey published in January 2008, about 66 percent of China's 210 million internet users had contributed contents to the internet. Over 35 percent of respondents indicated that in the past six months, they had either posted messages or responded to messages in online forums. About 32 percent had

⁶ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), "Survey Report on Internet Development in China," July 2007. www.cnnic.net. Accessed May 15, 2008.

uploaded pictures and 18 percent had uploaded films, television programs, and other video materials.⁷ In this context, even messages of protest posted in online forums may contribute to the internet economy, a phenomenon that internet companies are well aware of. The downside of the commercial aspect of activism is that unprincipled intervention in the process of public expression on the part of internet companies may not only mislead the public, but in the long run, damage the credibility of internet public opinion.

Internet Activism and Political Change in China

- 8.1 In recent years, internet activism has become an important source of social and political influences in China. First, internet activism is a source of public opinion. Major events in China today, from natural disasters to social crises, often entail some form of popular contention online. With the rapid development of the internet, Chinese netizens have developed a culture of participation and public expression. Critical social issues tend to draw large-scale participation. Online discussions and debates reflect general public concerns.
- 8.2 Second, internet activism is a new form of citizen mobilization. The digital space where it happens, such as online communities and electronic bulletin boards, is a new type of civic space. Online communities are new types of civic associations, which netizens increasingly rely on to organize a broad range of citizen activities.⁸
- 8.3 Third, internet activism causes policy change and affects state behavior, both in the short term and in the long run. The most important change is in the area of information governance and information rights. Internet activism contributes to the awareness of information rights by eroding information control and propaganda. It makes it harder for state authorities and news

⁷ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), "Survey Report on Internet Development in China," January 2008. www.cnnic.net.cn, accessed May 15, 2008.

⁸ The most recent example is the mobilization of online communities in the disaster relief efforts in the wake of the earthquakes in Sichuan.

agencies to control information. In 2001, a school explosion in rural Jiangxi province killed 42 people. In 2002, a food-poisoning accident in the city of Nanjing killed over 40. In both cases, government authorities attempted to put a media gag on information, but were eventually forced to reveal the truth because of exposure and controversies on the internet. These cases led some scholars to claim that the internet has brought about the demise of propaganda based on centralized information control. Whether the alleged demise has occurred or not is open to debate, but it is clear that centralized information control has become increasingly difficult.

- 8.4 A longer-term outcome of internet activism is that it has built up social pressure for government transparency and public participation. For example, in April 2007, the State Council promulgated the “Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Government Information Disclosure.” This was the first of its kind at the level of the central government, with a mandate to “ensure that citizens, legal persons and other organizations obtain government information in accordance with the law” and “enhance transparency of the work of government.”⁹
- 8.5 Also in April 2007, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) issued China’s first-ever “Regulations on Environmental Information Disclosure.” The regulations require both government and business enterprises to disclose environmental information in order to safeguard the rights of citizens to obtaining information about the environment. The process of formulating this regulation reflects popular pressure. For years, SEPA officials had been working closely with environmental NGOs to promote public participation. For example, in April 2005, SEPA held the first public hearing of a controversial environmental project concerning the protection of the lake bed of the Yuanmingyuan Garden in western Beijing.¹⁰ The public hearing resulted in the cancellation of the project. The hearing took place after

⁹ Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu xinxi gongkai tiaoli” (Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Government Information Disclosure) http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2007-04/4/content_592937.htm, accessed April 3, 2008.

¹⁰ China holds environment hearing over disputed project in imperial garden.” April 14, 2005. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200504/14/eng20050414_181007.html>, accessed April 3, 2008.

environmentalists launched a media campaign to oppose the project and request a public hearing.

- 8.6 Recalling the destructive aspects of Red Guard populism during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, both foreign observers and some Chinese intellectuals have expressed concerns about the populist trend of China's internet-savvy activists. Although internet populism, to the extent it may be discerned, has had more positive than negative social impact, it is nonetheless a growing trend that merits serious attention.