

# **subordination**

by A. Pokrywka

# THE **END** OF ATOMIZATION

## EFFORTS BY AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES TO CONTROL SOCIAL MEDIA FALL SHORT OF THEIR DESIRED **ENDS**

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essay

THE RISE OF FACEBOOK AND OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS HAS LED TO SPIRITED DEBATES AS TO THEIR IMPACT ON THE ABILITY OF POLITICAL AUTHORITIES TO CONTROL POLITICAL SPEECH AND TO SUPPRESS PUBLIC UNREST. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENT NEW CHALLENGES TO AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, WHICH HAVE HISTORICALLY SOUGHT TO CONTROL THEIR PUBLICS BY GIVING THEM A SHARED SENSE OF DESTINY WHILE AT THE SAME TIME ATOMIZING THE PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS. THE GOAL HAS BEEN TO SUPPRESS DISSENT BY MAKING ANYONE WHO HAS CRITICAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THE STATE TO KEEP THEM TO THEMSELVES.

This can work on several levels. At its most basic, this strategy makes individuals wary of sharing negative thoughts with other citizens – even friends or relatives – for fear that they would be exposed to the authorities. The extreme example of this was the Stalinist people's hero Pavlik Morozov, the son who supposedly informed on his father in 1932. Since everyone is afraid to say negative things about the state, it becomes impossible to tell if other people share your doubts.

A more insidious deterrent to dissent is to make critics question their own judgment. After all, if all the media and all your friends and colleagues say things are fine, then maybe there's something wrong with you. The Soviets elevated this particular approach by declaring critics of the state schizophrenics. After all, since the Soviet Union was the worker's paradise, anyone who was alienated from it had to be crazy.

The result of these stratagems is that once an uprising against an authoritarian or totalitarian regime begins, the realization among the populace that their ideas and feelings are shared by many others unleashes a passionate outpouring of civic discontent and an all-consuming appetite for information of any form as long as it does not come from the regime. I remember first seeing this in Lisbon in 1974 shortly after the Carnation Revolution which brought down Portugal's fascist government. Practically every blank wall in the city was plastered with posters representing the positions of every imaginable opposition faction. Similarly, Beijing's Democracy Wall in 1979, the opposition press of pre-martial law Poland, and perhaps most tragically, the marches and speeches that preceded June 4, 1989 in Beijing, all tapped into an enormous well-spring created by decades of suppression of free expression.

When the authorities regain control, one of the first priorities is to cauterize dissent: to remind people of the costs of speaking out. In Poland in December 1981 the regime arrested thousands and stationed tanks and heavily armed soldiers on every major intersection of every major city, albeit with little bloodshed. The massacre of hundreds of innocent civilians on the western approaches to Tiananmen Square on the night of June 3-4, was not needed to remove the remaining students in the square. It was intended to destroy any notion that the regime could be criticized with impunity.

The Massacre in Beijing did work much better than Poland's martial law in ending open opposition to the authorities, at least for a time. In fact,

in shortly before the massacre I was told by a Polish journalist that when Deng Xiaoping had met with a delegation from the Polish United Workers Party in April, following the historic Roundtable Agreement, he told them that the PUWP would never have had to surrender power if they had simply shot more people in 1981. At the time, I discounted his account as hyperbole, but after the June 4, I began to believe that there was probably a germ of truth in it. That said, by the late 1990s even the Communist Party of China found it increasingly difficult to keep a complete lid on public discontent. To a large degree this is simply the result of the passage of time. Unless an authoritarian regime is willing to shed the blood of its people with ruthless regularity, say every decade or so, those wellsprings of dissent will begin to seep to the surface. The number of violent social demonstrations in China has risen steadily in the past two decades, and is now estimated at around 200,000 per year.

Nevertheless, the regime maintained strict control over all media channels until 2009 when Chinese Internet firms began to offer the opportunity for citizens to share their views with the rest of the public through social media sites called Weibo. These microblog sites soared in popularity and quickly challenged the CPC's ability to atomize the public. Although often compared to Twitter, Weibo can be a far more powerful way to share information. While both channels limit messages to 140 characters, in Chinese that equates to words rather than letters. As is the case with Twitter, the vast majority of messages contain personal news or refer to popular culture, but a significant minority were used to spread word of government malfeasance or neglect. Perhaps the first such significant cause was the crash of two high-speed trains in July 2011, in the suburbs of Wenzhou, China, killing 40 people. China's newly empowered Netizens demanded a fuller accounting of how such a tragic accident could occur and eventually created sufficient pressure to force the firing of three senior officials. In fact, that incident eventually helped topple the once indomitable Ministry of Railways that has now been broken into more manageable parts.

Over the past few years campaigns aimed at food safety and environmental problems have swept the Chinese blogosphere, drawing millions of followers and comments. In many cases, the government has been forced to redress grievances, which previously would have been ignored and, importantly, left to fester until they led to public demonstrations. In addition to raising complaints about China's manifest pollution and food safety, China's Netizens have used their newfound power to target corrupt local officials, particularly those who have been abusing their positions for personal gain for years by selling agricultural land to developers. These transactions

raise much-needed funds for local governments but often include kickbacks that enrich the officials, while displacing farming families who have worked that land for years. Much of the growth in public disturbances referenced above has been attributed to the increased impunity with which these land grabs have been executed.



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As is the case with social media everywhere, these campaigns often turn into vigilantism. Chinese Netizens use the power of the Web to research and take down officials deemed to be corrupt. These so-called 'flesheaters' create virtual teams to scour the Web for evidence of malfeasance. One of the earliest examples was the fall of Brother Watch. Yang Dacai was the head of the Shaanxi Provincial work safety administration in 2012 when he was photographed smiling broadly at the scene of a traffic accident that left 36 people dead. Netizens were outraged at his callousness and some noticed he was wearing a watch no one in his position could afford. Eventually, the public uncovered a dozen photos of Yang wearing equally expensive watches. A year later he had not only lost his job but had also been sentenced to 14 years in prison for corruption.

From the CPC's point of view this flowering of citizen involvement is fraught with danger, since it effectively short circuits the Party's control over the flow of information to and most importantly among its subjects. On the other hand, as has been demonstrated over the past year, China's new leadership team headed by CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping has realized that official corruption has become an existential threat to the regime. Social media can both help identify the worst offenders at the local level and provide a safety valve to relieve the public discontent that has been festering for the past two decades. In theory, the regime understands the positive role the Internet and social media can play. As a white paper from the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China concluded in 2010:

"The Internet provides unprecedented convenience and a direct channel for the people to exercise their right to know, to participate, to be heard and to oversee, and is playing an increasingly important role in helping the government to get to know the people's wishes, meet their needs and safeguard their interest."<sup>1</sup>

1 PRC Information Office 2010.

Needless to say, however, the people's wishes don't always conform to those of their leaders, and over the past year or so China's leadership has increasingly adopted what Asian academics like Singapore's Cherian George have dubbed a neo-authoritarian approach to controlling information flows. Rather than total censorship, regimes can adopt a flexible strategy designed to discourage the worst attacks on their rule while allowing even official outlets a modicum of freedom to criticize government policies and practices.

In China, over the past few years the central authorities have spent billions of dollars to create a "Great Firewall of China." An estimated 2 million censors scour the Web employing sophisticated algorithms to uncover postings viewed as subversive and block them as well as any key terms associated with the issue. In addition, government employees respond to rumors with postings designed to disprove or discredit them. This often leads to a cyberspace game of cat and mouse with Netizens quickly inventing workarounds. For example, the regime still suppresses all references to the Beijing Massacre and blocks terms such as June 4, so in 2013 wily Weibo posters used the term May 35 (i.e., 4 days added to May) instead. The censors rapidly blocked that term as well, but not before thousands or even millions received the message.



IN ADDITION, GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES RESPOND TO RUMORS WITH POSTINGS DESIGNED TO DISPROVE OR DISCREDIT THEM. THIS OFTEN LEADS TO A CYBERSPACE GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE WITH NETIZENS QUICKLY INVENTING WORKAROUNDS

In the past few months, however, it has become clear that as he consolidates his authority Xi Jinping has decided that the cat should stop toying with the mouse. As of September, individuals can face defamation charges if their online postings are deemed to be rumors and if they get 5000 views or are reposted over 500 times. A series of high-profile prosecutions has apparently produced the desired chilling effect, as social networking sites like Sina Weibo have seen a sharp drop in traffic. Instead, China's netizens have retreated to newer mobile messaging services such as WeChat in which it is easier for users to control the people who join their networks, hence attracting less attention from the authorities. The regime, however, can and does monitor accounts of people it deems potentially disruptive.

Many commentators have pronounced this as at least a partial victory of the forces of control over those of public expression, and indeed it does seem that the halcyon days of social media as a counterweight to power of the state are over. Then again, it may be that not every revolution needs to result in a regime change that removes the ruling elite. In many ways, the Chinese political scene has been transformed in just a few years:

- The official media make a much greater effort to report accurately, at least on non-controversial issues.
- Local officials are much more likely to face corruption charges based on public complaints.
- Arbitrary confiscation of farmland has abated
- The first reaction of the regime to criticism is not always to lash out at the critics but to check to see if there is some merit in their opinions.

Perhaps most importantly, the traditional authoritarian strategy of atomizing the public has been destroyed. Regardless of how much the regime controls Internet postings and social media interactions, hundreds of millions of Chinese have learned in the past few years that they share a China Dream that can be quite different than the one their leaders have for them. None of that would have happened without the initial flowering of social media, and it is impossible to overestimate the impact the resulting changes will have on China, its people and its leaders in the coming years.

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