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Three Forces Acting behind the Development of the Internet

Hu Yong

This article is the transcript of the speech delivered by Prof. Hu Yong of Beijing University at the workshop "Consensus and Spring Luncheon" on March 29, 2014.

This year marks the 20th year of the advent of Internet in People's Republic of China; besides the annual commemoration day also falls in April. Many people might be wondering, after all, what has the Internet brought into China during the past two decades. And by extension, what all can we make out on the basis this nodal point?

As I look at the past history of the Internet, basically I can find that there are three forces acting behind it: the country, the market, and the masses. And as the Internet was forged by these three dissimilar forces, there emerged three dissimilar governance models, too. The first governance model is the model guided by the country. The second model is the one guided by the market. In the year 1995, two British scholars put forward a concept, called: "The Californian ideology." Thanks to [this ideology] the West coast of America witnessed a brand-new ideological trend and this very same brand-new ideological trend ultimately gave birth to today's free and open Silicon Valley; besides, it pushed the industry from semiconductors to computers and again from computers to the Internet, until it reached today's mobile Internet, all of which are the products of "the Californian ideology." The third model is the one led by the masses. And this model has a rather extreme variant and I would call this variant the radical libertarianism. And this radical libertarianism actually appeared in the year 1996; at that time there was a rock music writer called Barlow; and, Barlow in that year had an extremely famous thing called, "Declaration of independence by Cyberspace" and it was told through the article

thus: You are a bunch of predator Giants, you are a bunch of past governments, don't get into our net and interfere with us; we are the future while you folks constitute the past, we enjoy sovereignty in the cyberspace." So, this is the typical third model.

What is curious about this third model is that, actually it has been built with efforts of each other and is intertwined with each other and therefore cannot be completely separated. While "the Californian ideology" and things like that do represent the independent market, however such things cannot exist without the government in the background. Conversely, to an extent we also know that "the Californian ideology" has also spawned acts of the State; such things are called the Information Superhighway. And things like the Information Superhighway are in fact the infrastructure built up with the power of the government, including in China. In reality, these three things act together. The information Superhighway has ultimately brought in thinking like this to everyone: that the technology utopia could be achieved through a certain technology. And with this technology utopia in backdrop, it may be said, for instance, that the designer may materialize some dreams for humankind with the help of certain institutional systems; and therefore in this sense the Internet could be viewed as a catalyst for democracy and liberation. In this sense, it is associated with the "Declaration of independence by Cyberspace" of Barlow, and they overlap each other.

However, let us see how the situation will change twenty years from now; for instance, as for the sovereignty issue of the Internet, the sovereignty mentioned by Barlow meant that we do not want any act of interference by the government or commerce in matters regarding the net and netizens. But, in the year 2010, China had for the first time issued to the world a white paper on "China's Internet Situation." In fact there was a background behind coming out with this white paper by China, in that China and Google had fought a battle as an outcome of which Google had to withdraw from China. The Chinese government had made it clear through the white paper that the infrastructure existing within the Chinese territory is part of China's internet sovereignty, and therefore you are required to abide by our internet sovereignty. To put it another way, so long as you carry out any activities within our territory, or your physical servers remain in our territory, you must then adhere to the rules and regulations of the Chinese government.

You may make out that there exists a whole galaxy of difference between the two accounts in terms of internet sovereignty. However, what is interesting is the West regards this Internet sovereignty as an extension into the Cyberspace of the already backward and bankrupt political sovereignty; actually the traditional national sovereignty is also encountering great challenges. The people of the West then thought that such a statement posed a problem; however, following the 'Snowden incident' that occurred the previous year,

China's justification totally disrupted the lessons learnt by the West in regard to this issue. To put it another way, the re-delineation of Internet space (re-nationalization) has now become a trend. To cite an example, following the occurrence of the 'Snowden incident', Brazil demanded that if Google wanted to operate in Brazil, the physical server of Google must be installed in Brazil and they shall not have it in California nor could they install it wherever they would find it convenient, because how can one know, from where they could or could not infringe upon the right to privacy of the citizens of Brazil, even the right to privacy of the President of Brazil.

This implies that we may not be having a world with only one Internet, we may have multiple Internets; in other words, it may be that the Chinese model might still have certain victory in the domain of Internet, because China has all along insisted that it should have its own Internet. This is the paradox with regard to the matter. In the whole process, the Internet companies have again played a certain role of castigating the people, and everybody knows that all major Internet companies have provided the information concerning them to the government, but where the government has carried out various kinds of analyses or various types of monitoring with respect to them, the Internet companies have gone on record saying they were helpless; therefore, the ethics with respect to the Internet companies themselves has also become a big challenge.

We have stated upfront that out of the three models, two have been called into question. Therefore, at the moment, all those who have felt that the Internet belongs to the masses have come up with an initiative, which is described as: "We want to reclaim the Internet." The reason being, the country and the enterprises have betrayed the Internet. With the result that the Internet we have today is not in the same shape as we dreamt of in the year in which it was put up. Among them there is a well-known representative [named Bruce] Schneier, an American cryptology expert, who has put forward three aspects as regards to how to reclaim the Internet.

First, we have to expose all monitoring by the governments because it is not something we can allow. Second, we have to redesign the Internet. This call is majorly to be granted to the engineers, and the engineers can carry out new designing with respect to the present framework of the Internet. Third, improve upon the governance of the Internet. The core issue with regard to the Internet is that one country cannot be allowed to decide on the trend of the Internet. For instance, a situation cannot be allowed to prevail where America has the Internet of America, Iran has the Internet of Iran, China has the Internet of China. Secondly, the Internet should not just remain an affair between the governments of countries; on the contrary it should be an affair to be discussed together by global civil societies.

I feel we have to carefully watch as to how the Internet will proceed in future and how a trade-off will come about among these three forces. But, let me sum up finally, one thing has become extremely plain during the past twenty years. When you proposed the idea of an Internet twenty years ago, you uttered some beautiful words; you talked about equality, democracy, and independence; whereas today as you talk about the Internet, it is control and review. Will such a shift in discourse be pulled over in future, I do not know, but it is also something we have to continue to watch. Thank you all!

Annotation

Puthiya Purayil Sneha

When you proposed the idea of an Internet twenty years ago, you uttered some beautiful words; you talked about equality, democracy, and independence; whereas today as you talk about the Internet, it is control and review.

This telling statement from Prof. Yong's speech perhaps sums up for us the aporetic idea that is the Internet for most of us today. The Internet, like with most other new technology, has always been a bone of contention in most parts of the world; given its strange paradox of democracy and openness, and virtually unlimited possibilities in terms of access to people, knowledge and resources, but also multiple concerns of regulation and control of the flow of information. In the context of China, this paradox becomes even more significant due to the short but very chequered history of the Internet in a country which has the largest number of Internet users in the world, at a figure of 642 million in 2014. The speech lays out what have been some key events of this history

in the recent past, and the conditions within which the political economy around the Internet has emerged in China, which also has significant implications for many years to come.

Chief among these are the issues of Internet sovereignty and governance, both of which have emerged as important problems for the rest of the world to contend with in the last couple of years. An important aspect of Internet development in China is that all online access is controlled by the government, with bandwidth being rented out to telecom service providers, and only a few private players in the market. With such a control over infrastructure and networks, the government also brought in very early a regime of censorship, in which citizens' access to the Internet is closely monitored by the 'Internet police,' a force numbering 2 billion in 2013. The infamous 'Golden Shield project' also known as the 'Great Firewall of China,' has been symbolic of this regime, and the focus of much activism around free speech and democracy. China monitors the Internet through extensive legal and administrative provisions, due to its claim to Internet sovereignty in a white paper issued in 2010. This has

allowed it to regulate and control access and usage of the Internet within its borders, using an advanced mechanism of surveillance, filtering and blocking of content, with the large means at the disposal of the state. As a result, access to any information construed as politically sensitive is restricted, and dissent is easily suppressed, in effect imposing a condition of self-censorship wherein individuals and institutions willingly monitor and censor their online activity to avoid dire legal consequences. The Google controversy mentioned in the speech is perhaps the best example of the problematic idea of Internet sovereignty and self-regulation. Google entered the Chinese market in 2004 in compliance with the self-censorship regime with a filtered content search, but in 2010, following a barrage of cyber attacks on its infrastructure and loss of data, decided to move to an unfiltered version and redirected all search operations through Hong Kong instead of mainland China. Ostensibly, the restrictions on foreign players in the market has led to the growth of a thriving industry in China, with better access and innovation, which is often claimed to be based on the American model. In fact, as global social media sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are blocked, their Chinese counterparts such as WeChat and Sina Weibo get to serve and innovate on the basis of a huge market protected from external competition. Blocking of global players, hence, does not stop in any way a large part of the Chinese

population from being online and taking part in the 'social' web. The Internet has definitely bolstered the economy in several ways that were unimaginable before, especially with increased mobile phone access. According to a report by the McKinsey Global Institute, depending on the speed and extent of industry adoption, the Internet could add 0.3 to 1.0 percentage points to China's GDP growth rate from 2013 to 2025. It is expected to change the very nature of growth by enabling GDP based on productivity, innovation and consumption, to develop a more sustainable model of economic growth.

The notion of Internet sovereignty, as contentious and problematic as it is, further complicates how we understand governance and regulation of the Internet. As Prof. Yong points out, the condition of a fragmented Internet with each country developing its own forms of regulation can actually be counterproductive to the goals of increased connectivity, sharing and access, as a result of which much of the democratic potential of the Internet would remain unrealised. Vint Cerf et al (2014) argue that Internet governance is a shared responsibility, because the Internet is "both a technology and a socio-economic space." it is a shared environment, and unlike a traditional commons "it is capable of growing at the will of those who use it and the entities that invest in its expansion". Its boundaries may therefore not be drawn as easily as with physical space, as the notions of space and community itself come into conflict

due to the very fluid nature of the web. Stemming from this idea are several questions about regulation of speech online, dissent and activism itself, as citizens and particularly activists have always had to find innovative and sometimes insidious ways around the Internet police to communicate with each other and the rest of the world. A regularly used tactic is to actually publish politically sensitive material online and wait for it to be pulled down by authorities, because in the time that is taken down several people would have read and circulated the material. Another example is the famous meme on 10 mythical Chinese creatures featured on the interactive

encyclopedia Baidu Baike, wherein vandalised and humorous contributions using profanity were made to the encyclopedia in an attempt to illustrate the uselessness of content filtering. As such, activism in the digital space can take various forms even in the face of several limitations.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Internet is still in some sense an aporetic idea, so models of governance and development need to keep in mind its expanse and immense potential for growth, with due consideration that democratic governance is incomplete without space for dissent.

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