

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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CHINA

THE INTERNET: CHINA'S FOURTH ESTATE



Danwei

Jeremy Goldkorn
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Introduction

China's investigative journalists and a small group of news publications have become increasingly bold over the last decade. But the internet is now the most powerful force in China's emerging rights movements, the exposure of abuses of power, freedom of expression and the development of a real civil society. Emboldened by several high-profile cases of injustices brought to light by online activism, concerned citizens and reporters are taking to social media to air their grievances and attract publicity to their cases.

The official response usually includes repression of information. The Chinese government continues to operate the world's most extensive censorship apparatus, affecting both traditional media and the internet. Because of this and other factors, not all citizen grievances or activist and journalist campaigns are successfully exposed on the internet.

Nonetheless, the huge numbers of Chinese citizens online – more than 450 million people at the time of writing – and the blazing speed with which social media spread certain kinds of information mean that news about breaking events can no longer be hidden by the authorities.

To understand how the internet is changing challenges to the abuse of power and social resistance in China, it is useful to look at two events that took place in late 2010 and July 2011:

- “My dad is Li Gang” – a fatal hit-and-run accident by a well-connected young man who was exposed online in October 2010
- The Wenzhou high-speed railway disaster on 23 July 2011.

Precedent: The brick factory slave children

Precedents were set many years before the “My dad is Li Gang” scandal broke on the Chinese internet. The watershed moment was perhaps the 2007 exposure of a brick kiln run using slave labour.

In June 2007, an internet user posted a letter to a Chinese internet forum appealing for help. The

authors of the letter were some of the parents of more than 400 children who had been kidnapped and forced to work as slaves in a brick factory in Shanxi province. After finding out where their children were imprisoned, the group of parents attempted to rescue their children, but were prevented by security guards and local police working in cahoots with the brick factory's owners.

Within a week of publishing their appeal for help online, the affair became a cause célèbre, and the Shanxi provincial government shut down the factory and liberated the children. The nationwide scandal erupted online first, driven by citizen anger, while the traditional news media had to play catch-up. The first traditional media to report on the case were the more commercial and independent local news organisations, but within a week of the scandal breaking online, even the highly controlled central government news organisations such as Xinhua News Agency were forced to publish stories about it.

This pattern has been repeated many times since 2007: an outrage of some kind occurs; citizens post text, photos or videos about it on the internet; the postings are forwarded virally; and only then do the traditional media catch up and report, usually followed by government action. Once the public outcry has been appeased, censorship usually steps up again, and many of the internet postings about it disappear.

Case 1: My dad is Li Gang

The “My dad is Li Gang” case followed the same pattern. Baoding is a city of more than 1.5 million people in north China's Hebei province. On 16 October 2010, a 22-year-old man named Li Qiming was drunk and driving his Volkswagen Magotan down a street inside the campus of Hebei University in Baoding to take his girlfriend back to her dormitory.

Li drove into two rollerblading university students, Chen Xiaofeng (20) and Zhang Jingjing (19). Chen died soon afterwards and Zhang was seriously injured. Li ignored the injured students and drove away. Before he left the university grounds, some campus security guards tried to stop him, but he screamed out of his car window, “Sue me if you dare! My dad is Li Gang!” and drove off.

Li Gang was the deputy director of the Baoding public security bureau (i.e. police authority) in Beishi district, where Hebei University is located.

Li Qiming was not pursued or arrested after the incident, even when Chen died of her injuries the next day. Some bystanders had seen the accident and Li's escape and complained of it to local news media and on the internet. But nothing happened to Li, and there was evidence to suggest a cover-up was orchestrated to keep the news out of the media. The police did not investigate.

Some students who had witnessed the accident continued to post about it online. In particular, they focused on Li's words, "My dad is Li Gang." Four days after the accident, a blogger organised an online competition which required entrants to use the phrase "My dad is Li Gang" in a poem written in classical Chinese style. There were hundreds of submissions and thousands of users voted for their favourite poem.

The phrase became an internet meme: photoshopped images and spoof videos of George W. Bush and other famous figures appeared using "My dad is Li Gang" to signify arrogance, corruption and a lack of decency.

By 20 October, the "My dad is Li Gang" case was famous and newspapers started reporting on the case. On 22 October, Li Qiming appeared on the country's most highly censored and conservative media platform: the state-owned broadcaster CCTV's news channel. He wept and apologised for his deeds, but if anything the apology further enraged his online critics.

There were two important factors behind the strong online reaction to the Li Gang case. Firstly, the catch phrase "My dad is Li Gang", which rolls off the tongue in Chinese (*wo ba shi Li Gang*), made the case memorable and inspired all kinds of darkly humorous creativity.

Secondly, there is a growing resentment felt by ordinary young Chinese people about the conspicuous wealth gap that now exists in China between a tiny privileged elite and the rest of the country. This is clearly expressed in the Chinese online slang for the children of the rich and powerful: *fu er dai* (literally second-generation rich) and *guan er dai* (second generation of government officials). By contrast, many internet users identify themselves as *pimin* – rabble (or literally "buttocks people").¹ Li Qiming's expensive car and his confidence that he could escape even being questioned after a fatal

accident that he caused made him a perfect symbol of the *fu er dai* and *guan er dai*, and the *pimin* rose up in rebellion online.

As the anger seemed to be directed against the system, not just Li Qiming, government censorship efforts stepped up. The story was scrubbed from some news websites. In the last few days of October, directives from government propaganda organisations, leaked onto the internet, ordered the media to stop "hyping" the Li Gang case. Li Qiming remained at liberty.

But the stink over Hebei University and Li Qiming would not go away, partly because people continued to circulate fresh information about the victims and Li Qiming, and viciously funny "My dad is Li Gang" jokes.

Despite restricted media coverage and a perception that the authorities were reluctant to investigate the case properly, Li Qiming was arrested in January 2011, and sentenced to six years in jail and a large fine at his trial at the end of that month.

Li remains in jail, and "My dad is Li Gang" remains a popular catch phrase on the Chinese internet.

Case 2: The 23 July Wenzhou high-speed rail crash

Just after 8 p.m. on a Saturday night, 23 July 2011, a bullet train on one of China's new high-speed railway lines smashed into the back of another train that had stalled on the tracks.

At 8:47 p.m., a passenger on the stalled train with the pseudonym Yangjuan Quanyang tweeted from her Sina Weibo microblog: "Help, the train D301 is derailed just ahead of South Wenzhou Station, passengers are crying and we cannot find any train crew, please help us!"

Since its launch in summer 2009, the Twitter-like Weibo, operated by established news portal Sina.com, has become one of China's most popular web services and a powerful tool for the exposure and viral spread of information. Weibo played a large role in the aftermath of the Wenzhou crash.

Late into Saturday night when most journalists and government information minders were sleeping, news of the crash circulated on Weibo. Yangjuan Quanyang's tweet was widely cited by media as the tweet that broke news of the crash.

By Sunday, the official death toll was above 30 and officials were blaming the accident on a lightning strike, an explanation that did not satisfy an outraged citizenry on the internet.

Claims emerged in news reports and on the internet that the rescue effort had stopped after only five hours of work. As much as ten hours after that, the final survivor was rescued, a two-and-a-half-year-old girl.

¹ "Pi" literally means buttocks or "arse"; "min" means people. Rabble is probably the best translation to convey the sense of the word, but does not have the connotations of rudeness and slang. The phrase could also be translated as "ordinary bums".

Even worse, on Monday, eye witnesses posted photos and video to the internet that appeared to show some of the wrecked train carriages being buried, less than 48 hours after the accident.

One video showed a carriage being pulled from the railway viaduct. What looks like a dead body appears to fall out of a window to the ground. It looked like evidence was being covered up and nobody believed that a thorough investigation could be made in such a short amount of time. A Ministry of Railways spokesperson told the media that the carriages were being buried because of marshy ground underneath the viaduct, saying that they needed a solid platform for rescue equipment. He concluded his statement with the words, “Whether you believe it or not, I believe it,” which quickly became an internet meme and, again, the source of darkly critical jokes.

The initial official explanation of the cause of the accident – that the first train was struck by lighting – was widely criticised on the internet and it fed into an already toxic public opinion of China’s railway authorities. In the first half of the year, as the high-speed rail project was being hyped by foreign media and hailed as a glorious achievement of the Chinese Communist Party, doubts started to emerge. In February, Minister of Railways Liu Zhijun lost his job and an investigation began into charges of corruption. Some media organisations and bloggers reported tales of massive corruption: huge bribes and kickbacks, and stories that Liu used some of his ill-gotten gains to keep eighteen mistresses in a life of luxury. There were suggestions that quality was sacrificed for speed and that some of the corruption in the Ministry of Railways meant that inferior construction materials were used to allow officials to embezzle the money they saved.

The combination of public suspicions about the railway authorities and the poor handling of the rescue emboldened journalists and editors. In the week after the accident, small news magazines, websites, newspapers, and even the normally conservative CCTV News produced investigative reports and highly critical commentary. Even the Communist Party mouthpiece newspaper *The People’s Daily* said in an editorial that China should not pursue “blood-stained GDP” – that growth should not take precedence over people’s lives.

The period of openness did not last long: eight days after the accident, news of the accident and its investigation disappeared from newspaper front pages. Propaganda organisations began warning news media of consequences for failing to toe the new line, which amounted to “keep quiet, don’t investigate and use only authorised reports.”

Two poems from the “My dad is Li Gang” online protests, with their implied classical poetry references

The final couplet from the Tang Dynasty poem “Seeing [my friend] Xinjian Off at Lotus Tower”, a sad poem about two friends parting:

洛阳亲友如相问
一片冰心在玉壶

If my friend at Luoyang asks of me, you may answer: “He’s keeping his pure heart and affection in a jade vase, forever.”

Li Gang version:

洛阳亲友如相问
就说我爸是李刚

If my friend at Luoyang asks of me, you may answer: “My dad is Li Gang.”

The philosopher Mencius (*Mengzi* in Chinese, 372-289 B.C.) said:

君子穷则独善其身
达则兼善天下

If a gentleman is poor, he does good works in solitude; if he is rich, his work is for the good of the whole world.

Li Gang version:

穷则独善其身
富则开车撞人

If a gentleman is poor, he does good works in solitude; if he is rich, he drives his car into people.

There is no doubt that the blitz of media and internet reporting on the accident will result in a more thorough investigation. But it remains to be seen how transparent the authorities will be about the results.

Conclusions

The Li Gang and Wenzhou train crash cases illustrate how the internet is allowing Chinese citizens and activists to expose abuses of power – but not all such cases will captivate the public, and the results are mixed, depending on official sensitivity to the case.

A key factor in most successful cases is that the wrongdoing has some resonance with China's internet demographic, which is largely made up of under-40s with middle-class aspirations. In the two cases discussed here, resentment about the behaviour of the privileged elite and frustration with a train system that has been held up as a national achievement were key in inspiring a strong online response.

The two cases above can be contrasted with attempts by online activists to organise a "Jasmine Revolution" along the lines of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, which failed to elicit a response from the Chinese public and only resulted in a crackdown on activists, lawyers and journalists.

The key difference is that the Jasmine Revolution calls had no concrete goals, nor did they attempt to redress a specific wrong, but rather to start a movement challenging the political system. Not only do such movements cause much harsher repression and censorship from the authorities, they do not generate a sympathetic response from ordinary people on the internet.

Action steps

The following key points are useful learning experiences for any civil society action planned for the internet:

- Publicising a grievance or a cause in China is complex. However, the internet has become the key tool for this type of communication, and the Weibo service is currently the most active and useful method.
- Calls to investigate a specific case of wrongdoing, especially when it involves common resentments, are more likely to be heard. Abstract targets and calls to change the political system do not go anywhere.
- Eye-witness accounts, photographic and video evidence, particularly of violent or fatal events, are the most likely materials to attract citizen interest. ■

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

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