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CHINESE BAN

Author / organisation	New York Times
Year recorded	2007
Region	Asia-Pacific · China
Category	Governance/political
Original source	nytimes.com
Archive page	kiwanja.net/mobile-database/chinese-ban/

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April 25, 2005

A Hundred Cellphones Bloom, and Chinese Take to the Streets

By JIM YARDLEY

BEIJING, April 24 - The thousands of people who poured onto the streets of China this month for the anti-Japanese protests that shook Asia were bound by nationalist anger but also by a more mundane fact: they are China's cellphone and computer generation.

For several weeks as the protests grew larger and more unruly, China banned almost all coverage in the state media. It hardly mattered. An underground conversation was raging via e-mail, text message and instant online messaging that inflamed public opinion and served as an organizing tool for protesters.

The underground noise grew so loud that last Friday the Chinese government moved to silence it by banning the use of text messages or e-mail to organize protests. It was part of a broader curb on the anti-Japanese movement but it also seemed the Communist Party had self-interest in mind.

"They are afraid the Chinese people will think, O.K., today we protest Japan; tomorrow, Japan," said an Asian diplomat who has watched the protests closely. "But the day after tomorrow, how about we protest against the government?"

Nondemocratic governments elsewhere are already learning that lesson. Cellphone messaging is an important communications channel in nascent democracy movements in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East. Ukraine's Orange Revolution used online forums and messaging to help topple a corrupt regime.

Few countries censor information and communications as tightly as China, which has as many as 50,000 people policing the Internet. Yet China is also now the largest cellphone market, with nearly 350 million users, while the number of Internet users is roughly 100 million and growing at 30 percent a year.

The result is a constant tension between a population hungry for freer communication and a government that regards information control as essential to its power. Anti-Japanese protesters have been able to spread information and loosely coordinate marches in a country where political organizing is illegal.

"That has to put the government on guard," said Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the University of California at Berkeley. He said the recent organizing effort was even more notable because no one had been able to identify any of its leaders.

To be certain, these protests may not be a reliable predictor of any future popular movements. They basically endorse Communist Party policy, rather than challenge it. Public antipathy for Japan has made it easier to mobilize people. Perhaps most significant, the government sent signals for weeks that the public interpreted to mean that the marches were "politically safe."

But the scale of the protests did seem to surprise the government. There is no doubt that underground chatter created momentum.

"Chain letter" e-mail and text messages urged people to boycott Japanese products or sign online petitions opposing Japanese ascension to the United Nations Security Council. Information about protests, including marching routes, was posted online or forwarded by e-mail. Banned video footage of protest violence in Shanghai could be downloaded off the Internet.

"Text messages, instant messaging and Internet bulletin boards have been the main channels for discussing this issue," said Fang Xingdong, chairman of blogchina.com, a Web site for China's growing community of bloggers. "Ten years ago, this would have been unthinkable."

In Shanghai, the local police even sent out a mass text message to cellphone users the day before that city's raucous protest. "We ask people to express your patriotic passion through the right channel, following the laws and maintaining order," the message said. Some marchers saw the message as a signal to proceed, while others took it as a warning.

In early 2003, text messaging and the Internet played a major role in helping people pass reliable information - and also unfounded rumors - about the outbreak of SARS at a time when the government was covering up the disease.

In the anti-Japan protests, people have sent old-fashioned chain letters to friends via e-mail or text message. Typical is a 23-year-old professional in Shanghai who asked to be identified for this article by her English name, Violet. She uses an instant messaging service on her work computer to communicate with 50 people on her "contact list."

Before the Shanghai march, one person on Violet's contact list sent her links to vote "no" in online polls about Japan joining the United Nations Security Council. Violet voted and then forwarded the links to more than a dozen other people on her list.

She also received an instant message to join the Shanghai protest and recruit others. But she said the day before the protest, her cellphone buzzed with the mass message sent by the Shanghai Public Security Bureau. She decided not to march.

The next day, though, friends on her contact list sent Internet links to photographs of the protest that were banned in newspapers. Even her boss took a look.

"He said, 'O.K., look at the pictures but do not forward this,' " Violet said. "My boss does not want to be involved in political issues."

Others in Shanghai learned of the march from an Internet posting that included a suggested route for the march and tips like bringing dry food and not bringing Japanese cameras. Some people wondered if the government had planted it online.

In the past, the government has shown it can tighten monitoring of these technologies. Security officials are thought to be able to track a person's whereabouts by intercepting cellphone transmissions.

The government began cracking down on people using these technologies to foment anti-Japanese protests more than a week ago, before the Shanghai march. According to an employee at a major Internet provider, the government on April 14 ordered all Chinese Web sites to begin filtering anti-Japanese content. Then last week, several anti-Japanese Web sites were shut down because they were trying to organize new protests in May.

One Western analyst in Internet technology said the government has powerful filtering devices that can screen cellphone and e-mail messages. This filtering technology can separate messages with key words such as Falun Gong, the banned spiritual group, and then track the message to the person who sent it.

Falun Gong, in fact, used cell phones to coordinate protests until the government deemed the group a threat and launched a crackdown.

"There are things the bureaucracy could do if it found this sort of communication truly threatening," said the Internet technology analyst, who has studied China for more than a decade and asked not to be identified.

Yet many analysts agree that screening the Internet and cellphones is far more difficult than the practice of simply ordering state-controlled newspapers or television stations to censor a subject.

One reason is that a growing number of young Chinese have multiple e-mail accounts, including some with providers based outside China that are not filtered.

In an informal test last week, the words "anti-Japanese protest" were typed into an online messaging service. The response was: "Your message contains sensitive or uncivilized words. It cannot be sent. We are sorry." Similar problems arose with Chinese e-mail accounts. Yet the same phrase went uninterrupted via cellphone text messaging.

About 27 percent of China's 1.3 billion people own a cellphone, a rate that is far higher in big cities, particularly among the young. Indeed, for upwardly mobile young urbanites, cellphones and the Internet are the primary means of communication.

"If people can mobilize in cyberspace in such a short time on this subject," said Wenran Jiang, a scholar with a specialty in China-Japan relations, "what prevents them from being mobilized on another topic, any topic, in the near future?"

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