

# Few in China Complain About Internet Controls

by Deborah Fallows, Senior Research Fellow, Pew Internet & American Life Project  
March 27, 2008



Many Americans assume that China's internet users are both aware of and unhappy about their government's oversight and control of the internet. But in a new survey, most Chinese say they approve of internet control and management, especially when it comes from their government.

According to findings from the fourth and most recent of a series of surveys about internet use in China from 2000 to 2007,<sup>1</sup> over 80% of respondents say they think the internet should be managed or controlled, and in 2007, almost 85% say they think the government should be responsible for doing it.

This survey was funded by the New York-based Markle Foundation and directed by an internationally respected research team at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>2</sup> As required of all public-opinion polling in China, either the survey or the surveyors must be approved by the government, and some topics that Westerners might have liked to see addressed directly, such as censorship, were not. But a close reading of the results and findings highlights the Chinese perspective on some sensitive issues.

The Chinese government has long tried to control its internet in many ways. It censors or blocks politically-outspoken blogs. It has arrested citizens on charges of "inciting subversion" for posting articles in chat rooms critical of the Communist Party. It passes internet traffic through a "Great Firewall" designed to deny access to such international websites as Wikipedia, Technorati, all blogs hosted by Blogspot, and many sites maintained by the BBC. It also censors content on Chinese-based sites dealing with a host of topics, including the religious group Falun Gong, the 1989 Tiananmen incident, corruption among government officials, the independence movement in Taiwan, a free Tibet, various human rights issues, political incidents, or citizens' uprisings.

The government justifies its control of the internet -- like its control of all broadcast and print media -- with familiar broadsweeping rhetoric. Most recently, on the brink of ushering in the Year of the Rat, the government issued a regulation forbidding online audio or video content "that damages China's unity and sovereignty, harms ethnic solidarity, promotes superstition, portrays violence, pornography, gambling or terrorism, violates privacy, damages China's culture or traditions."<sup>3</sup>

Most readers of the Western press are aware of efforts by the Chinese government to control what its people can read and discuss online. Outside observers and human-rights groups monitor and criticize the government's actions and publicize the techniques through which technologically savvy Chinese internet users can work around restrictions. Some analysts also track and interpret the government's subtler shifts in balance that seek to encourage internet development while still exercising control over it.<sup>4</sup>

Some information on internet control issues makes its way inside China as well, within notice of ordinary citizens. Online stories may spread like wildfire before they are discovered and removed by authorities. And an influential and highly informed group of elite Chinese bloggers continues to test the limits and vigilance of the censors.

Alongside outside criticism and internal pressure for liberalization, other evidence suggests that many Chinese citizens do not share Western views of the internet. The survey findings discussed here, drawn from a broad-based sample of urban Chinese internet users and non-users alike, indicate a degree of comfort and even approval of the notion that the government authorities should control and manage the content available on the internet.

### **The Chinese view of the internet environment: unreliable content and risky experiences**

Findings from the survey depict mainstream urban Chinese people as holding a negative impression of many aspects of the online environment, from online content to the effects internet use can have on life. These include:

*Declining trust in reliability of online content.* Over four years of tracking user reaction, trust in the reliability of online content has fallen by one-half, from 52% in 2003 to 26% now.

Only about one-third of internet users (30%) said they considered online content reliable.<sup>5</sup> Non-users were even harsher in this regard with only 18% saying they considered online content reliable.

When internet users were further queried about their trust in different kinds of online content, they overwhelmingly said that they trusted information on government websites more than any other kind of online information. Three-quarters of respondents deemed reliable most or all the information on government websites, compared with 46% for pages from established media, 28% for results from search engines, 11% for content on bulletin boards and in advertisements, 4% for information from individuals' web pages, and 3% for postings in chat rooms.

In addition, an overwhelming 93% of internet users said they considered much of internet content to be unsuitable for children.

*Worries about the pitfalls of internet use.* Internet users thought internet use could lead to several bad outcomes: About six in ten, 61%, thought internet users could easily become addicted to the internet, and the same number thought users could easily be affected by online pornography. More than two-fifths, 43%, said the internet could lure users into making the wrong kind of friends, and another 42% said internet use easily presented risks to personal or private information.

These negative impressions were significantly stronger among non-users: 72% were concerned about pornography, 81% about internet addiction, 66% about making the wrong kind of friends, 55% about risks of exposing personal information.

### **The Chinese solution for internet housekeeping: control and management.**

How would the Chinese clean up what they see as a bad online atmosphere? An overwhelming number of Chinese, almost 84%, agreed that the internet should be controlled or managed, a response rate that has varied little in the surveys conducted since 2003 by Guo Liang, deputy director of the Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. But Guo argues that it is particularly significant now because of stepped-up negative coverage of the internet in the Chinese press, which keeps the topic on the public's mind.

When asked which online content they thought should be controlled, more internet users targeted the most offensive or annoying content: 87% of internet users would control or manage pornography; 86% violent content; 83% spam or junk mail; 66% advertisements; 64% slander against individuals.

Fewer respondents targeted the very popular but less malicious entertainment and recreation opportunities. Half of respondents said online games should be controlled, and more than one in four (27%) said online chatting should be controlled.

The findings for one type of online content -- politics -- may seem more puzzling. Since 2005, the percentage of users who say that online content about "politics" should be controlled or managed jumped from 8% to 41%, by far the biggest increase of any items tested.

Guo said that the explanation for this increase probably lies in the spate of widely publicized incidents of fraud, blackmail, sensationalism, and other abuse of Chinese citizens via the internet. The Chinese word used for "politics" in this survey, *zhengzhi*, is not confined simply to political rights or competition for political control but may be understood to include larger questions of public morality and social values.

When asked who should be responsible for controlling or managing the internet, more Chinese identified the government, 85%, than any other entity. In addition, 79% of Chinese said internet companies should manage or control the internet, just over two-thirds, 68%, identified parents, 64% schools, and 59% internet cafes.

### **Why are Chinese impressions of the internet so negative and why is government control the answer?**

*The negatives: a barrage of worries from the press, particularly about children.* Guo Liang, who authored the 2007 survey report as well as directing the project, has had much international experience as the Chinese

member of the World Internet Project and as a visiting lecturer and scholar at numerous Western universities and institutions. He writes that during the five years of surveying internet use in China, "media reports about negative aspects of the internet have increased both in scope and number." Indeed, reports linking the internet to unfortunate or unsavory events abound. Many are personal, heavy with human interest and include names, hometowns, and photos. Here is a sampling:

- In January, *Beijing Today*<sup>6</sup> reported on a blogger who documented the two-month evolution of her husband's affair with a work colleague and her own planned suicide, before she leaped 24 floors to her death. A curious netizen, as internet users are called in China, followed blog clues to track down the unfaithful husband and posted excerpts of the blog on a major Chinese portal, causing a firestorm of interest in the blog world and the philanderer's company, which promptly suspended the man (and his paramour) from work.

- Columnist Li Xing describes vicious and often anonymous attacks exploding on the popular blogs or bulletin boards. Sometimes these attacks are leveled against the famous, like film star Zhang Ziyi, for allegedly posing nude. Li Xing likens the violent and vicious postings and their hurtful effects to slanderous posters plastered on walls during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the highest profile press focuses on children and their internet use and abuse. Over half of all internet users in China are under the age of 25, and 20% are under the age of 18. Many have parents who are less sophisticated and more wary about computers and the internet than their children are.

The media, which all operate under direct or indirect state control, warn frequently about internet addiction when discussing technology's effects on youth. At the end of 2006, the media reported that the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League stated that more than 2 million children and teens were internet addicts. In 2008, the Xinhua news agency reported that 11% of youth ages 18 to 23 are addicted to the internet.<sup>8</sup> Online games are generally considered the main culprit of addiction, and the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which has tracked the online population since 1997, reported in their latest survey in January 2008, that three-quarter of netizens under the age of 18 have played online games.<sup>9</sup> The number of online gamers reportedly grew 23% in 2007.<sup>10</sup>

Dramatic stories are recounted in the press, telling of young lives ruined, such as those of An Zhiban and Zhang Fei, both of whom beat the odds to escape from rural backgrounds to enroll in China's prestigious Peking and Tsinghua universities. But then, their internet addiction led to expulsion, which was followed by rehabilitation and readmission, which then led to relapse and a second tragic expulsion.<sup>11</sup>

Other stories detail life in the military-like internet addiction rehabilitation centers, and there are statistics from the Beijing Reformatory for Juvenile Delinquents claiming that online violence and pornography influenced criminal behavior in a third of the youthful detainees.

Guo Liang suggested in an interview that stories about children's internet use, particularly the heavy use of online entertainment, play easily into Chinese parents' current worry-scheme at this particular moment in China's history. This is a new era of China's "little emperors" -- the single children born of the one-child policy that began in the early 1980s. These children, often portrayed as pudgy, spoiled children over-indulged with Western fast food treats, are the sole bearers of the burden of hopes and dreams (and future ) of their two

parents and four grandparents. In a culture where education is the key to realizing these hopes and dreams, and where studies and exams are the determiner of academic opportunity, the allocation of children's time is seen as a zero sum calculation: time spent playing on the internet comes at the expense of time spent on studies.

*The perceived inevitability of government control.* "Who should control the internet?" Guo Liang says, is a "typically American question." When he decided to include the question in his survey, he knew it was a rhetorical question, and he guessed the answer would be "the government".

Guo explained that people's acceptance of government control and management of the internet is born of the realities of modern Chinese governance and a historical sense in which the state is assumed to be broadly responsible for social management and public values.

Since the only legitimate source of authority in many aspects of Chinese life is the state, when Chinese citizens are of the opinion that some aspects of the internet should be controlled, it is natural for them to assume that the state should take the lead in doing the controlling.

### **Despite the negatives, staggering increases in the Chinese internet population.**

According to CNNIC estimates, there were 137 million Chinese internet users at the end of 2006, 165 million by mid-2007, and a whopping 210 million by the beginning of 2008.<sup>12</sup>

Why, in a highly-charged negative internet atmosphere, are the numbers of Chinese who are going online for the first time simply soaring?

*The culture of cool.* Despite negative press and despite anxieties and fears about dangers lurking online, Chinese users appreciate the internet for unprecedented opportunities to play and be entertained with cheap games and movies, and to be in touch via blogs and discussion boards with trends, movie stars and bands. Non-users, especially young people, pick up cues that they will be left behind if they don't get online.

In China, Guo Liang says, internet culture is definitely considered cool. In his survey, more than 80% of Chinese think they might feel out of date or out of touch if they don't know about the internet.

The demography of the internet user population plays into this sentiment. It skews heavily toward young, well-educated, urban, and male, and its new recruits follow this pattern. Computers and the internet are also seen as a future for many. China claims to turn out more than 350,000 university graduate engineers annually, compared with 134,000 in the United States, although the validity of this estimate depends on the definition of "engineer" and who is doing the counting.<sup>13</sup>

*The cup is half full, with new information and a chance to speak.* Findings in the 2007 survey show that although only 26% of respondents consider online content to be reliable, about 95% of Chinese believe they can learn new things by going online.

At academic conferences, professionals relate almost poignant stories of discovery -- of finding online content from libraries they could never visit, of virtually sharing ideas with colleagues they would never have

met. Lawyers and judges have new access to archives of decisions. Teachers share resources and lesson plans across great distances.

CNNIC reported that one quarter of Chinese internet users write blogs,<sup>14</sup> and many more take part in online discussions. Although the West may be most familiar with reports about political blogs in China, most Chinese bloggers -- like most American bloggers -- are actually keeping diaries of personal thoughts or daily lives and writing about hobbies and pets, about entertainers and pop culture. The internet represents an original chance for ordinary people to be heard or to connect with others around the country as never before.

Looking to the future, as online commercial ventures proliferate -- more shopping, more services, more types of transactions -- the internet will undoubtedly attract even more users, and the cup will become ever more full.

*Co-existence of contradictions.* Like many things in China, the internet is struggling into existence in a compromised and often puzzling way. The balance tips back and forth: heavy pronouncements and regulations by the government, and large-scale disregard by local "enforcers" and the users, youthful infatuation with entertainment and deep worry from parents, forces of commerce and exertion of authoritative control, periods of censorship and lulls of calm. And so on. In such a bumpy landscape, tolerance and even expectation of a controlled and managed internet should come as no surprise.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities," Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. November, 2007. Guo Liang, author and director. The [full report](#) including topline questionnaire and methodology can be downloaded from the website of the Markle Foundation, which funded the project.

<sup>2</sup> Guo Liang, deputy director of the Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who directed the study and authored the report, describes the interview process as follows: "The survey started with: 'Hello, I am conducting a survey sponsored by the Research Center for Social Development of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This is a confidential random survey and your response will remain anonymous.' The respondents should know they were being questioned by pollsters working for an independent survey company." He also notes that while CASS is not a government agency, it is funded by the government although this particular study was funded by the Markle Foundation, located in New York, and that more than 90% of CASS reports are not "official reports."

<sup>3</sup> [www.marbridgeconsulting.com/...](http://www.marbridgeconsulting.com/...)

<sup>4</sup> [www.danwei.org/...](http://www.danwei.org/...)

<sup>5</sup> Responses for "reliable" include "all reliable" or "mostly reliable".

<sup>6</sup> *Beijing Today*, January 18, 2008. p. 3

<sup>7</sup> *China Daily*, April 12, 2007. Li Xing, "Freedom to blog is not license to slander"

<sup>8</sup> [www.reuters.com/...](http://www.reuters.com/...)

<sup>9</sup> *China Daily*, January 18, 2008. p. 2

<sup>10</sup> [www.reuters.com/...](http://www.reuters.com/...)

<sup>11</sup> [www.10thnpc.org.cn/...](http://www.10thnpc.org.cn/...)

<sup>12</sup> Estimates of the size of the Chinese internet population vary a great deal, depending on the definition of "internet user" among other things. Estimates quoted here are most interesting for their trend, rather than for their absolute numbers.

<sup>13</sup> [www.businessweek.com/...](http://www.businessweek.com/...)

<sup>14</sup> [www.cnnic.cn/...](http://www.cnnic.cn/...)