Instructor’s Foreword

When Ali first came to conference with me about his research topic for my Spring 2004 class, “Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Culture,” he was very clear about his intent: he wanted to argue that the Internet offered a powerful weapon against authoritarian government. In fact, as he described it in his final reflection letter, “I envisioned a hopeful, anti-State, rhetorically packed argument supporting online dissent.” To this end, he worked his way through an impressive array of both primary and secondary sources: newspaper and journal articles, government reports, full-length books, censorship websites, and numerous weblogs authored by Chinese and Iranian dissidents. What happened then was something that happens to many writers: he realized that the evidence did not support his intended thesis. Instead, it left him with what he later called a “fatalist argument,” one that suggested not only that the Internet is an ineffective vehicle for dissent but that it has in fact actually strengthened the very governments that cyber-dissidents attempt to weaken. This conclusion altered the shape of his entire paper. The extremely passionate language and stance that characterized his earlier drafts gave way to a solid, logos-based argument that used an accumulation of evidence, a detailed analysis of examples, and a careful assessment of the both sides of the issue to move the reader to what he considered the inevitable, if undesirable, conclusion. However, his personal sympathies with the dissidents was not lost from the paper. He decided to cast the central conflict of his argument in terms of the well-known story of David and Goliath, suggesting clearly where his lines of sympathy lie. His revisionist approach to this biblical story is one of the greatest strengths of his argument: in allowing the massive Goliath to win, Ali points to his own—and the reader’s—reluctance to admit the ineffectiveness of the cyber-slingshot against the amassed power of nations. Although the final conclusion may not be as empowering as Ali had originally hoped, his paper in itself attests to the power of rhetoric and writing as an instrument of political activism and change.

Christine Alfano
The Free Internet: An Instrument of Control

Ali Batouli

Against all odds, with nothing but courage of heart and skill of hand, the young, weak David slew the large, daunting monster that was Goliath. How did this unknown shepherd’s son accomplish such a colossal feat and change the fate of his people forever? Simple: he had the appropriate weapon, namely his slingshot, for bringing down such a massive foe. Many modern advocates of absolute freedom and democracy around the globe believe that the Internet is their slingshot, a weapon they can use to topple the large, daunting authoritarian regimes around the world. The Internet provides an open medium for the instantaneous, free exchange of news and opinions. Comparable to a projectile weapon, it can be used to launch information from Washington to Beijing, from Tehran to Berlin or through any other imaginable path. Because it is relatively easy to use and provides a level of secrecy, many believe this tool to be the equalizing factor in the battle for freedom in controlled, tyrannical states. But as it is easily accessible and inanimate, the authoritarian Goliaths that the Internet is aimed at subverting have also gotten their hands on this tool, creating a two-sided Web war. The People’s Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Iran provide two major examples of this cyber tug-of-war under authoritarian rule. While the former is an example of a relatively developed Internet system, the latter shows a network in the bud, where both dissent and government controls are only developing. Both states have begun not only to use the Internet for their own benefit, but to find ways to counter its use by proponents of democracy. These Goliath regimes have slowly gained their own larger, faster cyber-slingshots that have compromised the sole advantage of the smaller, less resource-rich online dissenters. Consequently, not only has the Internet had little effect in propagating the cause of freedom, but this slingshot of democracy has in many ways increased the power and control of authoritarian regimes.

David’s Slingshot of Freedom

The very name, Internet, connotes a level of absolute connectedness, a structure in which every single node of the Net is in some way linked to all other nodes. This Net, or Web, spans the entire globe in such a way that a node in Brasilia can easily reach and communicate with one in Tokyo. The cyber-world has no boundaries, and like the universe we live in, is constantly expanding. According to political researcher Tiffany Danitz, this technology “permits its users to create and sustain far-flung networks based on common interests or concerns of the members, where none existed before” (Danitz). This global connecting ability is at the core of why many scholars believe in the “great subversive potential” of cyberspace (Taubman 259). Political ideas of freedom, expressed in audio, video or plain text, can instantaneously travel from an apartment on Independence Avenue in Washington DC to the basement computer of a house on Khomeini Boulevard in Tehran. Not only does the Internet allow for the transfer of ideas between countries with completely different political atmospheres; it also facilitates the transfer of “subversive” thought and information within countries. An activist in Beijing...
can easily post a website voicing criticism of the Chinese Communist Party or send out e-mails with similar content. He can, from the safety of his own desk, potentially spread his message throughout every home and Internet café in China and the rest of the world. This ideological freedom and decentralization of the Internet represent “a significant political threat to non-democratic regimes whose legitimacy and hold on power depend on a tame domestic ideational climate” (257). Other appeals of the Internet as a medium for dissent and free speech are its amazing speed and its relative anonymity. Cyberspace, in its pure form, is an arena in which anyone can say anything behind any mask to anyone who is willing to listen.

In the case of China, the voice of dissent started creeping into national networks more than half a decade ago, when pro-democracy groups from outside the country began publishing websites and sending e-mails to Chinese netizens, calling for reform and, in some instances, even revolution. One form of Internet use by dissenters is e-mail. Chinese computer software entrepreneur Lin Hai, for example, sold 30,000 e-mail addresses to VIP Reference, a US-based organization of Chinese dissidents (McDonald). VIP Reference later used these addresses to attempt a cyber war for the hearts and minds of these 30,000 Chinese citizens. Dissident English websites that can be read by many Chinese netizens present another form of online dissent. Websites such as grafixpix.com/buddha.htm are based in the U.S. and call for democracy in China and freedom for Tibet. Perhaps the most effective use of the Internet for dissent occurs when political dissidents from within the country post articles and viewpoints on the Web, in addition to or instead of printed distribution. There are dozens of examples of such cyber dissent including Lu Jiaping, who posted several controversial essays online, and Qi Yanchen, who put up excerpts from his book The Collapse of China (Van Der Made 5-6). Even the now-banned Chinese Falungong spiritual movement used the Internet to proselytize and organize its members (8). Thus many groups and individuals from within and beyond the borders of China have capitalized on the widespread communication powers of the Internet to spread their anti-regime messages.

Dissent in the newer Iranian webspace has followed suit with China. According to Graham and Khosravi, who have studied the Internet in Iran for the past half decade, “There are several sites where the multitude of Iranian political parties and organizations can be accessed” (Graham 232). These sites range from the Communist Party of Iran to the webpage of the son of the late Shah. Even reform-minded newspapers, which have fallen to the recent “crackdown” by the conservative Iranian judiciary, have turned to the Internet to express their views (Feuilherade). The Rouydad and Emrooz papers, for example, which were shut down in 2002 for publishing material deemed anti-Islamic, have created their own online news sites (Sokooti).

A form of dissent that is perhaps uniquely Iranian is the use of weblogs—commonly known as “webs” in Iran and “blogs” in the United States—to post illegal opinions and news countering the current government. As of 2003, there were 1200 weblogs in Farsi (Rahimi). While some are personal diaries and others are strictly political, the majority include an aspect of both. These weblogs are for the most part by Iranians in Iran but a few find their roots in the Iranian diaspora around the world. The website “Blogs x Iranians” (http://blogsbyiranians.com/) contains a listing of many Iranian weblogs, including their countries of origin. The weblogs listed range from that of the Iranian-Canadian Hossein Derakhshian, which expresses a mix of his personal life and calls for political reform in both Farsi and English (http://www.hoder.com/weblog/), to that of the purely politically
minded Tehran-based Iranian Girl, who criticizes her lack of freedom in broken English (http://iraniangirl.blogspot.com/). One weblogger from Tehran who calls herself Shahyad has as her motto, “In the fight for Freedom, we need to be United” (http://tehranonline.blogspot.com/). But perhaps the most famous Iranian Web source of political dissent is the site of the full-time blogger, Sina Motallebi (www.rooznegar.com). Motallebi’s posts are highly professional and filled with reformist rhetoric. Although he formerly posted his views and news from within Iran, he currently keeps up his weblog, which is completely in Farsi, from Germany.

**Goliath’s Defense**

From the many examples of e-mails, weblogs, websites and other methods of online dissent, it seems safe to conclude that the Internet is indeed a powerful democratizing tool. After all, how would Qi Yanchen and Sina Motallebi have so easily spread their words of dissent had it not been for the Internet? The World Wide Web is a very simple, fast and far-reaching method of spreading democratic information; however, as easy at it is to send information instantaneously through millions of fiber-optic cables, it is just as easy to block the flow of such communications. No physical walls or tanks are necessary to stop online dissent. All the governments of China and Iran have, or rather had, to do to stop the spread of information counter to their cause was to set up a virtual roadblock on the information superhighway.

Through trial and error, China has created a close-to-perfect system of Internet oversight and censorship. First and foremost, the government controls the infrastructure of the Internet, the actual physical cables that connect the Chinese intranet to the information held throughout the rest of the world. Thus the Chinese government has a physical point upon which it has constructed a national “Great Red Firewall,” using software to block all potentially “harmful” information from entering or leaving the Chinese network (Tan 265). “Subversive” material from foreign political sites or newspapers thus has no open pathway to enter Chinese Net-space. China’s control over the tangible Internet does not end at the door to the outer world; the government administers the four main networks within the country as well. Since it owns these networks, which license and administer the Internet Service Providers [ISP] that provide access to the public, the communist regime can maintain control over the macro-scale spread and use of the Internet (Tan 271). Traffic along these four main lines “can be restricted through the use of Internet filters, software that can deny access to specific Internet addresses” (Hermida). Indeed, the Chinese government currently prohibits access to a list of “500,000 banned sites with pornographic or so-called subversive content” (Hermida).

In addition to using its own censorship software, China requires multinational business partners to help the government in the information filtering process. The “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry,” which has been signed by 130 major web portals including the Yahoo search engine, holds such portals to censor their materials in such a way as not to “jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability” (Hermida). The powerful Google search engine, which was previously blocked by the Great Red Firewall, was also recently allowed to reenter the Chinese market after agreeing to filter search results (Hermida). Thus the censorship attempts of the Chinese government receive help from foreign businesses, which understand the potential for capital gain in China.

In addition to macro-scale monitoring and filtering, the Chinese government employs
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more than 30,000 people to control and monitor e-mails, weblogs and chatrooms (“China Online”). One example of the responsibilities of such a police task force is the constant monitoring and deletion of possible anti-government speech in the most popular Chinese chatrooms. According to BBC News, messages criticizing the government “either never appear or are purged from popular chat rooms” (“Chinese”). This level of attention to detail shows the Chinese government’s absolute commitment to stripping the Internet of its ability to maintain fast, free communication. The task-force also aids in undoing the anonymity and secrecy offered by Internet communication. By monitoring e-mails and tracking down IP addresses, the Net police can effectively find out the location of origin of anti-government speech, be it on a website or in a chatroom. Thus the popular saying by former President Bill Clinton that trying to censor the Internet is like “trying to nail jello to a wall” does not apply to China’s detailed, multi-level method of censorship. The Internet is inherently decentralized and free, but with enough resources and programming ability, neither of which are limiting factors for the Chinese government, much of the Web’s content can be monitored and regulated.

As a result of this expansive system of censorship, the controversial essays of Lu Jiaping and the book excerpts of Qi Yanchen no longer exist on the Internet. Even the US-based pro-Tibetan freedom website grafrixnpix.com/buddha.htm is not accessible in China. The site itself boasts at the very top, perhaps in a ploy to rile up emotion, that “this site is banned in China” (See Fig. 1). Thus the Great Red Firewall has suffocated the voice of dissent that may have previously existed on Chinese networks. And as the Internet and the potential voice of dissent grow in China, so will the level of sophistication of government censorship. According to a study conducted at Harvard Law School, Chinese “blocking systems are becoming more refined even as they are likely more labor- and technology-intensive to maintain than cruder predecessors” (Zittrain). So long as the Chinese government continues to adapt to new threats as it has been doing, it will have the upper hand in the battle for freedom on national networks.

Although Iran’s system of censorship is not yet nearly as effective or complex as that of China, the Islamic Republic is making headway in controlling the flow of electronic information as well. The infrastructural basis for the Internet is not as simple in Iran as in China. There is no single main portal to the outer World Wide Web in Iran as there is in the People’s Republic. The Iranian network is actually composed of more than 1,000 free, commercially run ISPs, with their own privately operated networks (Rahimi). Thus the task of control was, and still is, a bit more daunting for the Iranian regime. However, recently recognizing the political threat of the Internet, the Islamic Republic has begun to crack down on the online freedom it previously allowed. Instead of directly controlling the ISPs as the Chinese government does, the Iranian government now threatens service providers with “court action unless they block access to 15,000 sites deemed immoral” (“Iran Steps”). Since the vast
majority of these ISPs are in the business to make a profit, the possibility of being shut down overshadows any concern their owners may have for keeping the Internet free. Consequently, they have for the most part acquiesced to the government’s demands by developing and implementing censorship software (See Fig. 2).

Thus the more decentralized Iranian Internet corresponds with a more decentralized, and almost as effective, method of censorship. The end result is the filtering of both “pornographic sites and sites produced by political organizations opposed to the government” (Graham 227).

According to the ironically censored Iranian website stop.censoring.us, new websites are added to the filtered list every day. Just this January, for example, the news websites rouydad.com and emrooz.org, which are both “close to the main reformist party,” were filtered and ordered to be shut down by the Iranian Judiciary (Hoder). Payvand.com, a popular news source for Iranians outside the country, listed 43 reformist sites which were recently added to the filtered list (Free). Of the 43, some had been taken down while others were still available for viewing outside the Iranian network. And what about all the innovative Iranian weblogs? What about Iranian Girl, Hossein Derakhshan, Shahyad and Sina Motallebi? All censored. In her broken English, Iranian Girl sent up one of her last posts by stating that “the most important politic websites or famous weblogs [are censored] by many popular ISPs. And it’s a pity that all of anonymously web surfing websites are also filtered” (Iranian Girl). Shahyad also complains with an exclamation of frustration: “What a pity !! My weblog is blocked here in Iran by some filters!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (Shahyad).

Goliath’s Intimidation

Although Iranian Girl and Shahyad stopped posting after being censored, with a quick visit to rooznegar.com one can see that Sina Motallebi, the most politically active and professional of them all, still posts on a regular basis. This phenomenon is due to the fact that the former resident of Tehran was recently exiled to Germany. His exile came after being the first Iranian arrested for publishing anti-governmental material online (“Gagging”). Such arrests are a part of scare tactics, a more effective means of controlling dissent on the Web that has been employed for many years by China and is just beginning to arise in Iran. Scare tactics involve the inducement of fear in the general population in order to promote self-censorship. Such a psychological tool is perhaps far more effective than any surpassable firewall could be.

The Great Red Firewall and the Iranian decentralized method of censorship are by no means foolproof. With a bit of computer savvy, oppressed netizens can access an unrestricted Word Wide Web by linking themselves to a proxy server, a computer outside the country’s own network (Hermida). Such techniques and server lists are often posted online or in chat rooms (Hermida). But then what is the point of all the money and efforts expended by the authoritarian governments to control their webspaces if simple Internet tricks can get around them? Wouldn't everyone simply connect to a proxy server and access a more open Internet? Apparently not. According to information revolution experts Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, “although some may wish to access uncensored news or politically sensitive web sites, average users are too risk-averse to do so” (143). The “risk” that impedes the vast majority of Chinese and Iranian netizens from posting and reading pro-reform material online is a direct derivative of governmental scare tactics.

The first and most obvious method of invoking fear in the hearts of dissent-minded Internet users is punishing known online dissidents. In Iran, the case of Sina Motallebi...
Program in Writing and Rhetoric provides the first and so far only high-profile Internet arrest. In response to this arrest, Ayatollah Shahroudi, the Iranian Judiciary Chief, called for the “establishment of a special committee for legal investigation of Internet-related crimes and offenses” (Rahimi). With the public establishment of such a committee, the Iranian government wants to demonstrate that it is serious about controlling its networks. The regime is trying to show that Internet dissent is indeed a “crime” and that Iranian netizens should be aware of their every step on the Internet.

When compared with Iran, China has a more detailed history of punishing cyber-dissidents and using personal scare tactics to maintain control. Both Lu Jiaping and Qi Yanchen, the previously mentioned online dissenters, were not only censored but also detained by the Chinese government (Van Der Made 5-6). These two are not, however, the only examples of imprisoned Chinese cyber-dissidents. The Chinese government has arrested and made an example of citizens from all walks of life who have dared use the Internet to voice dissent. Guo Qinghai, a freelance writer; Jiang Shihua, an Internet café owner; Liu Weifang, a small business owner; Chi Shouzhu, a laborer; and Wang Zhenyong, a psychology professor, are among the 54 Chinese citizens who have been detained, and sometimes tortured, for posting controversial materials on the Web (5-6). According to the US-based journal China Rights Forum, these detainees “wanted to present a critical message and thought [the Internet] was a good way to criticize the government without being found out. They were wrong” (8). The Chinese government, with its 30,000-man-strong Internet police force, tracked down their locations through the use of their IP addresses and various other means. Under Chinese law, once caught, Internet dissidents “could even face the death penalty for posting certain material” (7). This threat of imprisonment and death deters users from even considering the use of the Internet for anti-government purposes.

Many of the above-mentioned Chinese and Iranian dissidents had not tried to spread counter-government news and opinions through nondigital means. They became interested in active dissent only after discovering the apparent secrecy and democratizing potential of the Internet. In all probability, the government would never have caught these would-be dissidents had it not been for the Internet. Although the Web may provide a forum for uncontrolled speech, it also allows a new system by which possible threats to the government can more easily be noticed and dealt with. Because some citizens may see the Internet as a provider of anonymity, they may be more prone to express their inner beliefs and criticisms of the government. Thus the Internet allows the government to find and detain more possible threats to its stability. In this way, the feigned democratizing power of the cyber world directly works against dissident efforts.

In addition to scaring would-be cyber-dissidents, both China and Iran have effectively implemented indirect scare tactics to control their networks. By threatening private ISPs and Internet cafés with fines and closures for allowing their users to visit ideologically “harmful” websites, the governments have added a second, private layer to their control mechanisms. In China, ISPs that detect a user trying to access forbidden material are required by law to “immediately stop the transmission, keep relevant records and report the situation to the relevant state authorities” (Van Der Made 7). If the Chinese ISPs do not obey these regulations, they will face large fines, and in some instances, closures (7). Since such Internet providers are semi-governmental, profit-based organizations, they are motivated to obey these regulations. Thus the ISPs act as a secondary enforcement agency for the Chinese government. In addition to requiring help from ISPs, the Chinese
The Iranian story is similar to that of the Chinese. Though there are no camera-infested Internet cafés in Tehran, many such businesses have been closed down for failing to uphold censorship standards (“Postcards”). Though ISPs are also required by law to inform the government of attempts to access restricted sites, this law has thus far proven unenforceable for the Iranian government and its limited Internet capabilities (Rahimi). The Iranian regime has not yet come close to the level of sophistication of the Chinese in censorship or effective scare tactics. However, in due time, if the Iranian government follows the “appealing” (Tan 274) model of the Internet created through trial and error by the Chinese, they can reach the level of control boasted by the People’s Republic. Indeed, when the Internet was in its bud in China in the early 1990s, the Chinese government had a similar “relaxed attitude toward the diffusion of Internet technology” as the Iranian government did just a few years ago (274). In some ways Iran can develop its control over the Internet even more effectively and efficiently than China, since instead of needing self-experimentation, the Iranian government can use China as a functioning model.

Overall, “soft control” of the Internet has proven effective at “promoting self censorship” in China, and to a lesser extent in Iran (Kalathil 141). New laws creating harsh punishments for Internet dissent and its tolerance by private companies have created a general fear among both Internet users and providers. Such a fear is perhaps a better friend to the authoritarian regimes than the most impenetrable firewall in the world.

David’s Size Disadvantage

We have seen that both the Chinese regime and, to a lesser extent, the Iranian government, effectively control the eyes and ears of their respective online communities through the use of technology and fear. But even in the unlikely event that these control mechanisms fail and the total potential Internet populations of both Iran and China are exposed to anti-government material, the regimes will not feel a significant blow. According to the highest estimates, only 1.7% of the Iranian population (Rahimi) and 7% of the Chinese population (“Riding”) have access to the Internet. These figures include those who surf the Net in Internet cafés. Even if an anti-regime message were to spread to every single one of these users via the Internet, there would be no large effect, for the vast majority of the population would never see the contents of this message.

Not only are Internet users a small minority in both China and Iran, but they are not at all representative of the general population. In China, for example, users are “predominantly male, young and with college or higher level of education” (Van Der Made 6). Simply said, Internet users are the young upper and upper middle classes, who have had little economic hardships and are too young to truly remember events such as Tiananmen Square. In general, these Chinese netizens do not have a great deal
to complain about, so any political message found online most likely will not resonate too deeply within their minds. In Iran, the story is similar. The 1.7% who actually have Internet access are part of the upper class and upper middle classes. A large portion of this population has a vested interest in the stability of the state for their own economic stability. Thus, although many Internet users may enjoy reform in both China and Iran, they are most probably not prone to outright revolt and dissent against the governments which have brought them relative prosperity. Furthermore, according to Kalathil and Boas, it is “questionable whether mere exposure to outside news is enough to sway popular opinion in authoritarian regimes” (143). From constant exposure to state propaganda and media, citizens of such regimes have become “skeptical to all media, international as well as domestic” (143). Thus, merely exposing them to opinions and information that undermines the government’s authority would most probably have little effect.

**Goliath’s Own Slingshot**

As a result of demographic limitations, censorship and fear, cyber-dissidents have had almost no success in spreading the message of democracy and causing any noticeable reform. Most citizens, who do not actively seek free news and democratic opinions, have not been exposed significantly to such materials. In both Iran and China, the effectiveness of the Internet has thus been limited to organizing groups and events. In the Islamic Republic, a student demonstration in June of 2003 was partly organized via Internet chatrooms and weblogs (Rahimi). Even this Internet aid could have easily been impeded had Iran earlier implemented weblog censorship and the chatroom monitoring program now prominent in China. In the People’s Republic, the Falungong spiritual movement managed to organize much of its member base online (Van Der Made 8). The movement has since been banned and its websites stripped from Chinese networks. These two minor accomplishments are negligible in comparison to the bold goals of many cyber-dissidents. After extensive search in newspapers, journals, and even dissident websites, the student demonstration and the Falungong movement provided the only instances of successful anti-government Internet campaigns.

Thus the voice of online dissent, after running through the powerful filters of censorship and fear, has failed to reach far. Cyber dissent has accomplished almost nothing in the ways of change and reform. The governments of China and Iran have effectively, though not completely, suffocated this online voice of reform and revolution. Recently, these governments have even begun to drown the remaining whispers of dissent in a sea of pro-government propaganda on the Internet. In Iran, government-supported news publications such as Etelaat (eteaat.com) and the Islamic Republic News Agency (irna.com) have established homes on the World Wide Web. Political figures have also set up their own websites. The president of the Islamic Republic, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, has created his own website at president.ir. The site has a warm, smiling picture of the president set upon a backdrop of the Iranian flag as its banner (See Fig. 3). Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader and the most powerful man in Iran, has his own website (wilayah.org) in which he expresses his views on Islam and politics. Even the vice president, perhaps in an attempt to seemingly lessen the distance between himself and the Iranian people, has created a weblog (webnevesht.com) with personal links such as “about me” and “pictures.”

![Fig. 3: The banner of President Khatami’s website, http://www.president.ir/](image-url)
Similar websites are also available in China. The People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese government, has a fully functional and aesthetically pleasing news site (peopledaily.com.cn). The People’s Republic of China also boasts its official “Government Homepage” online at www1.cei.gov.cn/govinfo/english/default1e.shtml. In fact, one does not have to search long at all to find Chinese government rhetoric on the Net. Just typing the word “China” in the Google search engine yields a plethora of government-sponsored sites on the very first search results page. One such site, for example, is that of the China Internet Information Center (china.org.cn), which claims to be the “authorized government portal site to China, offering news and searchable texts of government position papers as well as basic information about Chinese history, politics, economics and culture.” Not surprisingly, the first page of the Google search results contains no dissident websites whatsoever.

In general, both the Chinese and Iranian government sites and weblogs seem much more professional and detailed than comparable sites holding opposing viewpoints. Furthermore, unlike dissident sites, these websites are actually advertised legally throughout media other than the Internet. Thus the Iranian and Chinese governments can and have used the Internet to convey their own messages much more strongly than their opponents.

Goliath’s Unique Weapon: The Economy

In addition to allowing authoritarian governments a new portal to voice their own propaganda, the Internet has aided the stability of such regimes in a more subtle, indirect way. The Internet has ignited a rapid economic boom in both Iran and China. Through the introduction of Internet and computer-based hardware, software and service companies, private businesses have grown and thus helped the Iranian and Chinese economies. Indeed, the Internet has allowed developing countries that have introduced the technology into their economies to “leap forward into the Information Age, [translating] into great economic benefits” (Tan 264). This economic benefit was most probably the initial reason that such governments even allowed the introduction of such a potentially subversive technology into their countries.

But what do economic conditions have to do with dissent and stability in authoritarian regimes? Are not the causes for democracy and freedom ideologically driven? It is true that the principles of freedom and equality play an important role in the reformative and revolutionary process; however, for the most part, revolutionary change only occurs during times of economic instability. Political change of great magnitude under authoritarian rule is more often than not ignited by economic problems rather than purely social ones. The great rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that arose from the American Revolution had their roots in a people’s discontent at taxation more so than in any social ideology. Similarly, the bloody French Revolution that boasted Liberté, Egalité e Fraternité arose from widespread peasant starvation. Indeed, Karl Marx described the main cause of civil strife to be economic oppression (Anderson). Even according to Crane Brinton and Ted Gurr, both revolutionary scholars who stand against Marx’s purely economic model, political illegitimacy alone does not cause civil strife; rather a perception of “economic deprivation” is necessary for a populace to revolt (Gurr 14). Thus a successful economy that readily and candidly benefits the populace acts as the most important tool for maintaining order and control under an authoritarian regime.

The Internet has aided the creation of exactly such a successful stabilizing economy
in China and, to a lesser degree, Iran. With the introduction of the Internet, China “is moving from an information-scarce economy to the fastest-growing emerging player in the global market for Internet services” (Rao). In fact according to USAToday, Chinese Internet stocks are currently leading the US’s own Nazdaq technology stock index (“China Sentences”). As a result of this Internet boom, the national economy is growing at the almost-unheard-of annual rate of 10 percent (Lev). Even “cautious” Chinese government officials believe that this information-induced boom will lift “hundreds of millions out of poverty over the next two decades” (Schmid). This Internet-induced economic success and lift from poverty is undoubtedly having the opposite effect of the destabilization craved by online dissidents; it is helping the country grow and making the government’s policies ever more popular.

Though the Internet boom is not as strong in Iran, it is still significant. Computer stores are popping up all over Tehran and other Iranian cities to feed the population’s hunger for the Internet (Hammersley). This Internet “fever” has also led to widespread development of classes that teach web surfing and other useful skills related to the Net (Hammersley). As a result, the Iranian government “estimates that 800,000 jobs will be created in the Internet field in the next five years” (Hammersley). These new jobs will undoubtedly help lower the country’s 12% unemployment rate (Hammersley). The Internet is clearly not spreading as fast or currently benefiting as many people in Iran as in China, but even in a country where only 1.7% of the population currently has Internet access, its positive effects on the economy are undeniable. By helping better the living conditions of millions throughout both countries, the Internet is and will undoubtedly continue to be a friend of the authoritarian regimes that originally introduced it to their countries.

A Revision: Goliath’s Victory

From its origins in the Eastern Mediterranean to its modern-day worldwide expanse, the story of David and Goliath has remained prominent in the hearts of humanity because of its strong message: With the correct combination of will, tool and skill, the underdog can defeat his seemingly indomitable oppressor. The very appeal of this story is in its improbable and inspiring outcome. The tale provides hope for the weak and small. It allows marginalized groups and individuals, such as those fighting for absolute democracy, to have faith. It allows such people to think that perhaps, with the correct weapon, they may overcome their overbearing enemies just as swiftly as David. In the case of the Internet’s use in modern-day power struggles, however, such an improbable outcome as that of David and Goliath is rare. The Internet is no slingshot. It is no revolutionary weapon of democracy. The Web is not completely free. It has become a tool that is controlled, monitored and even used to advantage the state. Just as any other weapon, the powerful Goliath governments of this world have cleverly utilized it to save themselves from defeat by dissident Davids. Such regimes have reversed the outcome of the story: Goliath has defeated David with his very own slingshot.

“Idealism is what precedes experience; cynicism is what follows” (David T. Wolf qtd. in Moncur). Those who still believe in the revolutionizing powers of an ever-free Internet are, in a word, idealistic. They choose to ignore the unwanted teachings of experience. They choose to ignore the effectiveness of the State’s power to control its networks through censorship and age-old policing tactics. Perhaps believing that the State has all but won the Internet tug of war is cynical, but it is the truth. Cyber-dissidents must understand
that the Internet is no different than any other tool, be it television or print media; simply put, the regime has more resources, more power, and therefore the advantage. Internet hopefuls must understand that the Net is no equalizing and revolutionizing slingshot of dissent in the face of large overwhelming State power. This weapon, the World Wide Web, is only as worldly and wide as regimes such as China and Iran want it to be. In the end, the Internet has provided only one benefit to proponents of change and democracy: it has taught them the valuable lesson that no single weapon, no matter how seemingly equalizing, will win the fight for freedom.

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