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Cyber War or Cyber Vigilantism?

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By Jeffery Barlow

On the evening of March 15 I saw what many might call “Cyber War” unfold in real time. I was aware of the complexity of the phenomenon loosely labeled as “Cyber War” before the event. But the event persuaded me that much of what we describe with that term should be broken down into at least several other categories.

The “battle space” was a mixed-media event, entitled “Digital China and Social Media,” a live stream of a New York panel from The Paley Center for Media, which we viewed locally in Portland, Oregon. A local panel, including myself, then led local audience discussion. To see the program and its participants described go to the Website of the Northwest China Council, of which I am a member, but for whom I do not speak here [1].

The topic of the event as announced was:

“The central question of the event is: What is the relevance of new social networking technologies in our culture and society; and how can we use these tools for digital activism in order to foster positive social change, particularly in China?”

The actual event was quite different than I had expected from the above description. It featured Ai Weiwei, a noted Chinese artist and dissident [2]. He is a remarkable man who has done some wonderful work in Human Rights, at great personal cost, including being attacked by Chinese police in Siquan, an event which required hospitalization in Germany where he now lives.

The panel was late in beginning. In the meantime the Asia Foundation ran—actually began to run a second time as well—an appreciative—if not celebratory—video which featured both Mr. Ai’s human rights work and his art.

I had some concerns about the program from the beginning, because of the description offered by the Asia Society: “…and how can we use these tools for digital activism in order to foster positive social change, particularly in China?” This seemed to me to very likely be an example of
what I have described elsewhere as “Regime Change Lite,” an effort to further peaceful change in China by what are in my mind, heavy-handed and obtrusive means often amounting to the external encouragement of dissidence in China [3]. I think these efforts ill advised, culturally centric, and ultimately, fruitless.

But, as it is my opinion that the Internet is in and of itself moving China towards a sort of democracy [4], I agreed to participate on the local panel. I was also interested in seeing such a mixed-media event, which could make experts in specialized topics more widely available to small local audiences around the world. This would be a welcome alternative to noted speakers appearing locally with all the associated costs.

It was clearly the hope of the moderators that this event would be of great interest in China. But fewer that 300 people watched the event world wide, which put about 10% of the total audience in the room with us in Portland. There we had a good audience of quite sophisticated people. While it is possible that a few of them had not been to China, many were regular business travelers, China-born, or simply very interested in China.

Part of the problem with the audience was surely that at the time the event began it was barely 7 a.m. in China. None were watching from China at the outset, according to the moderators. However, there were soon overseas Chinese involved; they quickly registered for the accompanying Twitter feed and were able to participate in the program. The Twitter feed was shown on both a side bar to the streamed video, and projected on a screen in the Paley Center behind the panel for their local audience [5].

But we do not know if the Twitter participants were Chinese mainlanders, Taiwanese, from Hong Kong, or foreign-born. Many of them were watching from overseas locations such as Australia and Europe where they were in school. Several were also from the Unites States. These viewers can be fairly described as opposed to the Chinese government; we will use the term “dissident” to describe them here, though this does not imply that they are in any way activists or any more deeply involved than to participate by Twitter in the course of the event.

We were also joined by a number of pro-Tibetan Independence participants. Both pro-Tibetans and dissidents took the opportunity to communicate via the Twitter feed in what was certainly social networking. Their exchanges sometimes had as much to do with flirting as with politics. This produced such odd conversations as apparent offers for blind dates, accompanied by continual celebration of Tibetan independence and the evils of the Chinese government, particularly vis-à-vis Tibet. This was truly mixed media, which sometimes caused laughter in both the New York and local audiences.

The Twitter discussion was dominated throughout by a group of perhaps 15 individuals; the other Twitter members, if any, were silent. The frequent contributors to the Twitter feed had, in common, not surprisingly, a real interest in Twitter, and uniformly saw its blockage by the Chinese government as a major Human Right’s issue.
The panel was not, in my perhaps jaded opinion, completely successful as an exploration of the stated topic, but was truly focused on that tag line “...and how can we use these tools for digital activism in order to foster positive social change, particularly in China?” This was unfortunate, because the other members of the panel in addition to Mr. Ai, were quite expert in the topic promised to us.

These included, Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter and Richard McManus, the founder of ReadWriteWeb, said to be one of the top 20 blogs world wide, which focuses on web technology. Orville Schell, a Sinologist-journalist of considerable reputation and the Director of the Asia Society Center on U.S.-China Relations who was billed as the moderator, did not appear, without any explanation so far as I am aware. Emily Parker, an Asia Society staff member, also highly qualified by both experience and education, filled in for him.

Despite the presence of McManus and Dorsey, however, the show was almost entirely focused on Mr. Ai, and quickly confirmed my own suspicions of a “Regime Change Lite” performance. The presence of the pro-Tibetan independence group certainly pushed the event even farther in that direction than perhaps even Mr. Ai and the other participants wished. There were occasional discussions of Twitter and the Chinese digital scene, but as the dissident group drove the questioning, it invariably returned to a highly critical stance [6].

Since the Twitter feed was wide open, it was an irresistible target for spammers. We were soon treated to an attempt to steer traffic to what may have been a pornographic site on the Kama Sutra. Then about 45 minutes in, the feed was disrupted, apparently for political purposes. Cyber War, in short, was flaring up.

A participant subscribed to the Twitter feed, apparently from China, and began spamming nonsense characters. The dissident group excitedly described this disruptive presence as “50 Centers”, a play on the Chinese term Wu Mao, which means a netizen paid—at the piece rate of 50 Chinese cents [7] —by the government to either report anti-government content or to post positive pro-government comments [8]. A play upon the terms in Chinese, however, also suggests “Five Mao Zedongs,” meaning very leftist.

It is important to note that we do not know how many such individuals there were, or their motives. All we saw was repetitive nonsense messages which made no sense in either English or Chinese Romanization so far as I could see. Having been kicked out once, the spammer quickly returned.

The Asia Society had surprising difficulty in dealing with these intrusions, but finally managed to block the IP address from which they were coming [9].

It seems probable that the spammer was politically motivated, but working alone. A group would surely have used cell phones to coordinate IP hopping and would have effectively shut down the Twitter feed. But whether an individual or a group, whether Wu Mao or not, this incident shows
the weaknesses of mixed media-based Regime Change Lite, and says something about Cyber conflict as well. One, or at the most, several poorly organized individuals effectively disrupted a well-planned attempt to stage an interactive discussion worldwide.

However, lest we be over-confident in the rectitude of the dissident group of tweeters, they soon exhibited their own ability to use—if not abuse—the net. Toward the end of the scheduled events questions and comments were invited from the New York audience at the Paley Center. Most of these were intended to elicit more information from the panel, but one well-spoken Chinese-American businesswoman took Mr. Ai to task.

The woman, a native speaker of Chinese who now makes frequent business trips to China in financial services, asked, in the most polite terms possible, how he explained the great gap between his perceptions of a down-trodden fearful Chinese populace, and her own experience. In China she interacted with Chinese friends, colleagues, and relatives who seemed to her to be happy, optimistic, and increasingly well off [10].

I thought her question of Mr. Ai was a very sensible one [11]. He essentially replied that the Chinese people are so oppressed by their government as to be afraid to speak truthfully and asked—some might say demanded—to know who she was. She gave her name, and in response to another question from him, the name of her firm. He responded, again rather brusquely, that now she was on record.

Mr. Ai’s response was less interesting to me than the response of the Twitter audience of dissidents. They immediately began to discuss her name and her firm, attempting to fully identify her as an individual. One of them asked, “Can’t we Ren Rou her?” Ren Rou, literally “human meat” with a suggestion of hunting or cannibalism [12], involves using the World Wide Web to expose Chinese citizens to public anger, in some cases resulting in violence. There is a search engine or engines dedicated to that purpose in China, usually used to punish outstanding examples of violations of widely agreed upon social values [13].

Another dissident stated, “Ha, she underestimates our ability to use Ren Rou.” Other statements denounced her for taking a government line and for being a “Wu Mao”—clearly a term which is being used far beyond its original meaning of a paid pro-government flack.

Within several moments a dissident flashed the address of her Chinese offices upon the Twitter feed screen. The event ended soon after this exchange, but it seems possible that the lady may come to regret her inquiry, and her openness. But even if the dissidents do not follow up, the mere fact of having been publically threatened with Ren Rou is certainly a violation of democratic principles which illustrates the almost random nature of some flash conflicts now facilitated by interactive social media and the World Wide Web.

Altogether the presentation was a wonderful real-live example of social networking technologies. But it also very clearly demonstrates the difficulty of typifying Cyber conflicts. Any of the
participants on either side, dissident or pro-Chinese government, could well engage in retributive or revenge-driven hacking or harassment, and if successful cause an international incident.

If, for example, someone from China attacks some of Mr. Ai’s sites, or those of the Asia Society or the Paley Media Center, will some see such an attack as committed, organized or encouraged by the Chinese government, when it may merely be a Chinese teen-ager inflamed with patriotism?

On the other hand, if the Chinese businesswoman is attacked online, will this suggest an attack from Mr. Ai himself, from the Tibetan independence movement or from overseas Chinese dissidents? Or will it merely be a Chinese dissident youth desiring to court one of the other dissidents whom he met via the Twitter feed at the event by establishing his heroic bone fides and demonstrating his hacker skills?

This confusion is an inevitable problem with the Web and with social networking. Such conflicts as these are unprecedented and to try to force them into conventional analysis involving state conflict and the metaphor of war is usually senseless and misleading. Cyber War is a term which should be restricted to clearly established state-to-state digital attacks. As these are so difficult to attribute, the term is effectively meaningless.

Cyber Vigilantism seems a more appropriate term, with its overtones of righteous individuals taking the law into their own hands. But, as this event shows, Cyber Vigilantism knows no ethical boundaries. Most of us are probably drawn more to the youthful dissidents than to the Chinese government’s side, but either side is capable of behaving in a pronouncedly undemocratic fashion, even in a retributive one.

The Web has taken actions which earlier could be safely described as bullying or slander, behavior usually restricted by law if not by editors in a print environment, into an international, open and largely anonymous environment. It is very important that we are very cautious not to read too much into such incidents, as they will happen increasingly.

Moreover, we need a descriptive typology of digital conflicts which helps us distinguish between the important and the jejune. Suggestions and definitions from the reader are welcome at comments below.

**Endnotes**


[2] As Mr. Ai is expert in the use of digital media, it is not surprising that there are thousands of references to him on the web. I found the site at http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/32223/who-is-ai-weiwei/ to represent the man I watched for more than 90 minutes in the program under discussion here.


[5] It was my hope that the entire event would be captured at the Asia Society, and placed on the web so that I could reference it here for the reader. However, more than two weeks later, not only do all references to the event seem to have disappeared from the Asia Society site, but no such video is available. I hope that this is just a matter of delay in processing, though it would surely have been very easy to capture the event in real time for rebroadcast on their site.

[6] See an article on this issue which refers to the events I am discussing here at: http://mashable.com/2010/03/16/Twitter-china/

[7] *Wu mao* 五毛 or five cents of Chinese RMB, at current rates, about .007 cents U.S


[9] I have to observe here, that I think that what this individual shows that it is impossible for anyone to use this particular technology to present many sorts of materials to China, another weakness of Regime Change Lite. If it truly was a *Wu Mao* group of Chinese netizens, they were remarkably ill organized. Using cell phones and multiple IP addresses, they could have effectively blocked the tweet site indefinitely, and doubtless will do so in the future if another event such as this were planned.

[10] I had hoped to be able to quote her directly here, but as we assumed that the Asian Society was capturing the events and would post them, we did not do so at our end, and the event has not yet been posted.

[11] I note here that her description confirms quite closely to my own experiences in China, and to all those in our local audience who later voiced opinions on the matter. I thought her question of Mr. Ai was a very sensible one.


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ONE THOUGHT ON “CYBER WAR OR CYBER VIGILANTISM?”

christian ministry in china
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Heyy there, I think your site might be having browser compatibility issues. When I look at your blog in Firefox, it looks fine but when opening in Internet Explorer, it has some overlapping. I just wanted to give you a quick heads up!

Other then that, terrific blog!