

Exploring China's View on Freedom of Speech in the Online World

Throughout this essay, a summary of China's Cyber Sovereignty Policy, which was held at the (WIC) 'World Internet Conference', will be explored from philosophical and media-derived perspectives. Views from bloggers and the government will be explored, along with negative and positive outlooks. This data will bring light to the overall essence and representation of the Cyber Sovereignty Policy, 'freedom of speech', as well as Chinese citizens' & governments' feelings towards it. There are three types of reactions the Chinese citizens showcase which this essay will discuss; A. Following the rules whilst keeping silent B. Following the rules whilst speaking out C. Following the rules and banning everything that violates them. This essay will utilise Chinese citizens and the government's overall opinion towards it, to explore China's view on freedom of speech in the online world.

On November 19, 2014, 'over 1,000 internet professionals, officials, and experts from more than 100 countries and regions,' (Huanzong, 2014) attended the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen. Internet companies such as; Apple, Facebook, Google, and Alibaba were also present (Huanzong, 2014). During the World Internet Conference, Ma Kai, [vice president to Xi] argued for China's cyber sovereignty policy. It is there to, 'promote interconnectivity of internet infrastructure, the prosperity of internet economy, strengthen the sharing of internet technologies and ensure cyberspace safety' (Huanzong, 2014). Chinese President Xi Jinping was not in attendance but did send a congratulatory letter with the hopes that 'involved countries can jointly build a cyberspace of peace, security, openness and cooperation and an international internet governance system of multilateralism, democracy and transparency' (Huanzong, 2014).

For those who are invested in this project 'involved countries,' 'internet companies,' this a great chance to take the online world by storm! Those making a living by reporting, blogging, and influencing, who are trying to take the 'online world by storm' and make a living, how does it affect them? China's cyber sovereignty policy requires social media

influencers/bloggers to have 'government-approved credentials if they are to post anything on articles, politics, economics, military affairs, diplomatic and public affairs' (AP Press, 2021). On February 4th the *Cyberspace Administration* made a public speech announcing 'a month-long clean-up drive targeting search engines, social media platforms, and browsers' (AP Press, 2021). In December 2015, another WIC conference was held, reaffirming and enforcing the cyber sovereignty policy to a higher extent. This has led to Beijing clamping down over 1,000 social media accounts on those discussing pandemic policies (Savage, 2023).

Conflicting views from bloggers and influencers have been surfacing in various manners; Kevin Slaten, head of China Dissent Monitor wrote, 'In the streets, on banners, in cyberspace, collectively, and individually- people in China are speaking out' (Mandarin, 2023). 'Bloggers and influencers have had to apply for permits since September 2000' (Economy, 2023). 'It was a lot looser back then according to bloggers/influencers' (Savage, 2023). On the 31st Ma Xiaolin, voiced his opinion on the new policy, 'as an international affairs researcher and a columnist, it looks like I can only go the route of entertainment, food and beverage now' (AP Press, 2021). Xiaolin has over 2 million followers, often posting on Weibo, one of the biggest microblogging sites in China. Others have reacted differently.

Weibo has banned over '1,120 accounts and had more than 12,800 violations ranging from attacks on scholars to medical workers' (Savage, 2023). Weibo has sent messages to Ma Xiaolin to withhold from posting his original content.

A research survey was held in 2010 revealing how Chinese citizens felt towards the online world:

"300 Chinese officials revealed that 70% were anxious about whether mistakes or details about their private life might be leaked online. Of the almost 6,000 Chinese citizens also surveyed, 88% believed it was good for officials to feel this anxiety" (Economy, 2023).

Xi Jinping noticed that during COVID, the isolation created a surge of online critics that started to blossom, 'overwhelming Chinese health services and alarming the rest of the world' (Savage, 2023). Some of the 'anti lockdown protest' (Savage, 2023), were being orchestrated online. These critics protesting caused frantic behaviours in the Chinese citizens, 'overcrowding hospitals, emptying pharmacy shelves, hoarding medicines like paracetamol' (Savage, 2023). Xi Jinping regards the Internet as 'the main battlefield for the public opinion struggle' (Economy, 2023), and that 'the West's version of the internet prioritises freedom of information flow, as anathema to the values of the Chinese government.' (Economy, 2023) Hoping to 'advance commerce and innovation, without letting technology accelerate political change.' (Economy, 2023)

Xi Jinping was not the first to crack down on the internet, the internet in China has always been a puzzle, and finding the right lock was always the target, in the 1990s a new transformative software 'Golden Shield' gave the government access to search through data that was being sent or received, the 'ability to block destination IP addresses and domain names' (Economy, 2023). In the 21st century, the internet has become more prevalent all around the world. As Xi mentioned, the West has a unique approach to the internet, where 'prioritising information flow' can allow for obscurity in the shared information.

This paper has explored the Cyber Sovereignty Policy, its toll on the internet, and the restrictions and procedures that bloggers and influencers face. Philosophical and media-derived views have been shared through the use of media websites; Independent, guardian, politico and RFA. The three types of reactions of the Chinese citizens were demonstrated in the first point from the perspective of bloggers and influencers; Citizens A were riddled with anxiety scared to make a mistake. Citizens B were fearful but used their emotions to start protests online and on the streets. Whereas Citizens C were scared into supporting the policy to an extreme extent.

The Essence of the Cyber Sovereignty Policy illuminates freedom of speech, giving an entrance for Chinese Citizens opinions and reactions, highlighting their ideology (belief), on how freedom of speech should be approached in the online world. Enacting the policy in itself is telling everyone who reads up on it, the government's (Xi Jinpings), perception of

freedom of speech. As a philosopher, the opposing arguments made for and against the policy have stirred up contradictions: To what extremity should the Cyber Sovereignty Policy be enforced? Why has the level of trust decayed since the initial enactment of the policy? Are the reasons for enacting the policy in the 2000s the same as they are today?

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