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Is China becoming a “cyberdemocracy”? –
The Internet as a development policy
instrument

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Is China becoming a “cyberdemocracy”? – The Internet as a development policy instrument

Bonn, Aachen 8 August 2011. The „Arab spring“ has been an impressive demonstration to a wide public of the Internet’s potential for bringing about political change. Its potential for democratising authoritarian regimes has since been enthusiastically discussed, and social media services such as Facebook and Twitter are already being referred to as “tools of change”. But how easily can the developments in the Arab world be applied to other authoritarian societies, such as the People’s Republic of China, which, with about half a billion Internet users, is today home to the world’s largest cybercommunity?

Even though China cannot yet match western countries in terms of the Internet penetration rate, the dynamic growth of Internet usage in China is breath-taking: since 2006 the number of Internet users, or *wǎngmín* (网民), has risen by an average of 80 million each year (!). This trend is being deliberately encouraged by the Chinese leadership, which has, of course, recognised the positive implications of modern communication technologies for economic development. In China, as elsewhere the Internet is used primarily for entertainment, as a source of information and as a communications tool. Web 2.0 applications and social media have also arrived in the mainstream of society. What distinguishes the Internet in China from that in other countries is the relatively large proportion of content generated by users themselves, rather than professional providers. According to official data, some 317 million *wǎngmín* (65.5 per cent of the total) use the Internet for reading or writing blogs. They are currently joined by 195 million microblog users (40.2 per cent). In China, where there is no free press, blogs, forum contributions and comments on social media pages are increasingly assuming the role of the fourth estate. Especially in cases of

corruption, natural disasters and scandals surrounding hazardous products, the public need for the rapid disclosure of information and for transparency has been met by non-governmental actors on the Internet.

On the other hand, the state and party leadership also use the Internet for propaganda purposes. In addition a grassroots nationalism of non-government-controlled regime supporters has been gaining ground for some years, manifesting itself primarily on the Internet. Added to this is the system of observation, control and censorship of the Internet known as the “Great Firewall of China”. All western Web 2.0 applications, social networking sites and video portals have their Chinese “copy cats”, which dominate the domestic market and, being in the Chinese language, are easier to monitor: *RenRen* and *Kaixin* for Facebook, *Youku* for YouTube and *Weibo* for Twitter, most of the western originals being blocked. The censored Internet content includes pornographic pages, presentations by religious and opposition groups and western news services. Since the Nobel peace prize was awarded to Liu Xiabo in October 2010 and the democratic uprisings began sweeping the Arab world, China’s online monitoring has again increased significantly. These examples show that any automatic democratisation of the People’s Republic through the Internet is *not* to be expected.

The Internet is a decentralised medium and is shaped by the large number of its users, never by just one actor – even if he or she is as powerful as the Chinese state. This enables the Internet to set processes of pluralisation in motion and so to contribute to opinion-forming within Chinese society – and that is no mean feat. In another respect, too, the Internet is relevant as a “tool of change”: in recent years numerous online com-

munities have formed on the internet, drawing attention to their concerns on campaign websites. Such web-based groups and networked initiatives represent a new type of organisation, an otherwise prohibited alternative to organisations that are close to the Party and registered with the government. Online activism in China is chiefly concerned with such topics as the environment, consumer protection and corruption and speaks out against social injustices and discrimination. The discussion of such cases and topics is tolerated by the state.

All this indicates the enormous potential for a "Development Cooperation 2.0." Development partners in China, especially in the environmental and social sectors, are already integrating online-based communications strategies into their projects and programmes, operating self-help and E-learning networks, using the Internet for advocacy work, fundraising as well as for mobilising and networking members and supporters. Blogs that report on disadvantaged population groups and environmental pollution give a voice to those in whom the official media often take little interest. The Internet is also effective as an instrument of

development policy because the use of new media and mobile Internet technologies requires little infrastructure, making them particularly suitable for financially disadvantaged groups. Studies show that there is usually no lack of hardware and access to the Internet; what is missing is the necessary media competence among the rural population, for example, an ideal area for development cooperation activities. But so far it has been an area to which both governmental and non-governmental development actors have tended to pay little attention. Seen from this angle, the question repeatedly asked as to why development cooperation continues with an emerging economy growing as rapidly as the People's Republic of China, needs to be rephrased: the decisive question is not whether there should be development cooperation, but what form it should take. While a question mark at least can be placed against conventional poverty alleviation in China, the Internet offers tremendous potential for development cooperation aimed at promoting societal and political participation, fields in which China, too, will have considerable ground to make up in the foreseeable future.



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