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The general popularity of the internet has boosted and substantially changed two important realms. The first is the field of marketing, the second is the sphere of the information society. Using the internet, marketing experts are able to apply completely new sales techniques and channels in pursuing worldwide global business activities. Besides new markets and a higher turnover potential, internet marketing has created new jobs and economic growth, and as a consequence higher tax revenue for governments. In both the private and public spheres, the internet has made a fundamental contribution to the emergence of a communication society that exchanges knowledge and information at levels hitherto undreamed of. Probably the most positive effect of the internet as part of the process of globalization is the growth of wealth.

But the internet has also “negative” or “subversive” aspects. In addition to the spread of computer viruses and criminal information, the internet serves as an instrument for disseminating ideas, statements and knowledge that reach places where they were not intended to go. This problem is of special concern to states and countries that are currently undergoing a period of transition from an underdeveloped society and economy to ones that are more open and prosperous. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes are deeply troubled by the thought of political overthrow by a population that has become mentally emancipated from the restrictions imposed upon them. Every regime therefore has to weigh up the economic and social benefits against the potential political challenges that a widespread use of the internet might generate.

Shanthi Kalathil and Nina Hachigian demonstrate that the PR China and Singapore consciously risk the emergence of a society that is well-informed and ready to discuss political matters. For these two states, the social and economic benefits of the internet in general outweigh the political risks, but there remain many issues that should not become a matter of open or official discussion in the eyes of the two regimes. The control of data access and data flow by an internet
Police requires advanced techniques and can only, in the long run, be partially accomplished. As a result of this imperfect and selective control, sites like that of the New York Times had been unreasonably blocked, whereas the site www.freetibet.org has never been restricted. In many cases, the blocking of sites resembles a game of cat-and-mouse with the users bypassing the controlled locations by using proxy servers. Because it is impossible—and too expensive—to control all undesirable sites, the internet police has been content recently with a kind of self-censorship and self-policing by providers and users. The internet scene in Vietnam is still much more restricted than in China, while in Singapore, a semi-authoritarian regime, the government mostly controls sites run by the political opposition or those which they consider to be immoral, and this control is imposed especially on schools, universities, and internet cafés.

The government of Malaysia takes a quite different stance, one that fully exploits the positive effects of the internet on the economy. Because Malaysia wants to accomplish the great technological leap into the high-tech age, it has established a Multimedia Super Corridor and therefore eschews any blocking of foreign sites. At the other end of the spectrum, we find extremely authoritarian regimes like those of the DPR Korea (North) and the Union of Myanmar (former Burma), whose governments have suppressed any critical discussion for decades and whose authorities attempt to suppress most of the flux of information coming in from abroad. For these regimes, political survival far outweighs the economic benefits from the internet. This relentless stance—even possessing a computer or making an overseas call are prohibited—does not only derive from the fear of political challenge by a knowledgeable society, but is actually quite comprehensible from an economic point of view: Their populations lack “technical literacy” due to economic underdevelopment, so the implementation of the internet would not provide a boost to such non-industrial societies.

The study of Liang Guo and Wei Bu shows that in a country as vast as China the use of the internet naturally differs vertically (socially) and horizontally (geographically), depending on the economic and social background of the user. We can generally say that Chinese “netizens” (net citizens) are young, male, educated, unmarried, and have a sufficient income to afford a computer and telephone, but it is expected that, within a few years, the proportion of women using the internet will be as high as that of men. At present, most users do not have more than two years experience of the internet. Compared to the United States we can observe that in China more people not possessing a computer would be willing to invest time and money in the use of the internet if they had a higher income. Generally, Chinese non-users have a more positive attitude to modern technologies than in those in America. While the internet is an important sales and trade channel in the more developed countries, Chinese users rely on the internet mainly to obtain information and news, to chat and to email. It seems that many of the traditional media do not meet the demands of a knowledge-thirsty Chinese society. Both sides, population and government, show a very
positive attitude to the internet as an instrument for modernization and wealth creation.

Although the Chinese shares and securities market started only a decade ago (1990) it has doubled in size several times since the introduction of the internet and wireless technology—in spite of higher expenses for the online user. Huang Haifeng shows that the Chinese government consequently has had to issue ordinances concerning the safety and the utilization of the internet as a trade channel in general. For a long time, the government hesitated to make clear decisions about online trade because the internet should, in their eyes, serve as an evolutionary instrument rather than a revolutionary one. Particular attention had to be paid to the safety systems of the internet (encryption technology, firewalls, digital signature), which are still not adequate for to the scale of its use, and many users are still not aware of the dangers to their privacy. The main reasons for the enormous increase in online securities trade are the low costs for the brokerage firms, the velocity of information flow and the convenient access even from remote areas. However, online trade in commodities and goods is still not widespread, largely because commodity trade via the internet is still restricted and unaffordable for most companies and users. Many IT companies and firms offering services therefore provide technical support for the traditional brokers, and are thus given access to their consumer markets. For many brokering firms online trade is still insufficient and does not return their investment in the costly net structure. But simply their presence on the internet helps them to spread their corporate name and image and they hope to be repaid in the future.

Confronted with the so-called negative impacts brought about by internet media, especially after China’s access to the WTO in 2001, China is trying to regulate online networks with legislation, and encourage the conglomerate of traditional media to take part in this new medium. Sun Xupei shows that it is often hard to distinguish between traditional media and media using digital technology, as most big newspapers and news agencies have an internet presence. China’s internet population is expected to rise to 200 million by 2005, and there will be an urgent need to provide this community with the news and services they demand. In order to conform to the style and strategies of incoming foreign media and news enterprises, China cannot but lift all restraints on circulation services within the next few years. Laws and decrees concerning internet news, media and services are effective to some degree in standardizing and regulating the setup and the operation of domestic websites, in preventing and eliminating mis-information, and in safeguarding the security of the internet. But it is virtually impossible for individual people to open and maintain a website with up-to-date news information. To meet the challenge of the impending influx of overseas media giants, Chinese internet websites and other media have realized that it is necessary to merge the biggest TV and media groups into larger conglomerates. Although China’s media policy concerning content will be readjusted in the next few years of transition, there will not be any fundamental changes at the policy-making level in the foreseeable future—at least in theory.
The blocking of objectionable information will certainly not benefit the process of modernization. Yet we may also assume that prohibitive rules will be largely ineffective in practice.

Martin Woesler demonstrates that the increasing use of the internet in China is substantially contributing to the formation of a new public sphere. Even if the government tries to prohibit certain sites and controls the flow of information, the technical possibilities of the internet (bypassing via a proxy server, anonymous registering with a foreign provider, accessing via an international phone call, or loading a banished site into a browser frame) make it possible to disseminate every kind of information. Therefore, the Chinese government has turned to the device of self-censorship, demanding that publishers declare that they will refrain from producing, posting and disseminating information that may jeopardize state security and social stability. China’s main battle against the emerging information society was lost the moment China lifted its restrictions on international news sites and politically dissident sites. Even human rights information is now accessible through the international news sites. China, says Woesler, is on its way to a Western-style information society.

Enquiring into the potential negative impact of foreign cultures and civilizations on China, Lan Peng makes evident that not every product is subject to unlimited cultural dissemination. Chinese internet users are not simply passive consumers of this new technology, but create their own sites and pages, chat about their own subjects of interest and so actively produce a Chinese culture on the internet. Lan Peng provides the example of popular Chinese movies shown in theatres or on TV and Chinese bestselling books, which are also very popular online. There is no reason to cry out that the foreign English-speaking “wolf” is coming, devouring Chinese culture.

For any government presenting themselves as representatives of the people in the new medium is as much an issue as is the control of the unwanted influx and/or dissemination of objectionable thought. This presence of the state authorities in the extremely popular internet to ensure government power and party consolidation is called e-government. The Chinese government launched a Government Online Project (GOP) in 1999 not only to introduce representatives of the people and to create a paperless administration in the long run, but also to establish B2G (business-to-government) relations. A very important part of the GOP are the so-called “golden projects” that provide bridges of interaction between private people or companies and the government, like digital tax paying or credit cards (the jinka). To ensure the integration of firms and private persons into government structures, the Enterprise Online Project and the Family Online Project have been implemented. By controlling e-commerce through such a government-created structure, the Chinese government will be able, as Peter Lovelock and John Ure explain, to help state-owned enterprises to gain an advantage, while private e-commerce (called B2B “business-to-business” or B2C “business-to-consumer”) will be hampered.
The construction of an e-government cannot progress unhindered, however. Tan Xinjiao illustrates that hostilities between various governmental interest groups, and the fear government workers may have of technological changes and reform are some important impediments for the development of e-government as a medium for a better government image and improved government efficiency and transparency. E-government measures are not only established as a bridge between the government and the population, but also as a window for foreign investors and the international public.

By using a whole set of regulations and the manipulation of market forces surrounding the internet, the Chinese government is able to enhance its nation-building policy in a new way. In the paper by Christopher R. Hughes, we see that the nation-state is by no means declining in the age of cyberspace and globalization. The information revolution will not automatically spread liberal democracy and Western mores. When states combine regulation with market mechanisms and particular cultural formations, they retain and even develop considerable powers of control over the way in which the internet architecture evolves. Within the phenomenon of “one system-many countries” a kind of virtual realism will develop which will strengthen nations instead of dissolving them.

The book published by Zhang Junhua and Martin Woesler illuminates various important facets of the impact of the internet on Chinese society. While we might have expected that the Chinese government would seize the chances offered by this new technology to strengthen the development of a scientific and modern society and economy, it comes as somewhat of a surprise to learn that the government has given up the goal of totalitarian control of the information society. This surprising information about the challenge to party rule by an emancipating knowledge-thirsty society is enriched by evaluations of the evolution of Chinese online-trade. What the future of a free online-trade China will look like is still uncertain, but from China’s Digital Dream we learn that it will be just as complex as traditional trade. The internet in China will be a Chinese internet.