China’s Great Firewall (GFW) is a vast web of government-run online servers working 24/7 to block content to the country’s estimated 500 million internet users, commonly referred to as “netizens.” Netizens are prohibited by the GFW from accessing Western social media websites, and search-specific terms pertaining to government-deemed “sensitive material” are censored on a regular basis. The Chinese Communist Party’s stated motivation for censoring these mediums is to stop “the unhealthy trend of rumors being spread over the internet” from infiltrating the minds of Chinese citizens.¹

In recent years, censorship has made netizens resentful of government efforts to control access to information, particularly when other methods of attaining uncensored information exist. Given that this resentment is likely to grow with increased internet usage, the Chinese government will eventually be forced to be more responsive to netizens’ desires for more internet freedom if it wishes to maintain control over the population.

Media censorship is not a new concept in China. A media blackout was enforced throughout the country after violence broke out during the Tiananmen protests of 1989 and the government sought to bar its citizens and the rest of the world from gaining access to information about the event.² Even as late as 2007, the Chinese government successfully prevented an entire generation from knowing about one of the most politically heated events in China’s recent history.³

What made the media censorship successful for the Chinese government in the past only works marginally now. The internet makes complete media blackouts impossible. To compensate for blocking Western social media, the government works closely with a private company called Sina Weibo to provide comparable social media and micro-blogging services to the Chinese population. Yet, in spite of these efforts, China’s technological modernization has proven hard to control. As the government censors “destructive information” from the web, netizens are all too aware of the degree to which information is filtered by the GFW.⁴ Many purchase Virtual Private Networks

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(VPNs), which provide access to uncensored sources of information to circumvent the GFW. The result is that more censorship only makes netizens more resistant to government policy and the one-party system as a whole.\(^5\)

In January 2013, for example, a reporter for *Southern Weekly*, a Guangzhou newspaper, wrote an editorial advocating for more legal rights for Chinese citizens. After being submitted to government officials for proofreading, the editorial was returned completely rewritten to glorify government achievements.\(^6\) Reporters at *Southern Weekly* were outraged at the blatant lack of respect for journalistic license and organized a protest against the action. Reporters and citizens flooded the streets with hopes of convincing the overseeing authorities to publish the original article, but it never made it to press. Pictures of protestors and police were posted online, and Weibo erupted with comments on the physical confrontations and kidnapping of demonstrators.\(^7\) A few photos were instantaneously posted through cellular apps, and the incident became a global news story. In 1989, this never would have happened.

Why is there newly revived opposition to government restrictions? The answer is threefold. First, netizens now have the technological tools to stake a claim in matters of personal freedom and access to information. Although controlled, Weibo allows each person to voice an opinion. The Party allows Weibo to be used as an outlet knowing that too much content restriction will cause more resentment against the government. Second, censorship practices are widely known and abhorred by enough people that the issue has gained salience in Chinese society. No matter the amount of time and effort the Chinese government pours into supporting the GFW, many Chinese recognize technology will only adapt faster. Lastly, netizens see an opportunity for change in China’s recent leadership transition. China’s new president, Xi Jinping, has been touted as a liberal reformer, focused on reigning in excesses of Party cadres and connecting more directly with the average Chinese citizen.\(^8\) Many netizens pin their hopes on him to change the current system that works to repress internet freedom. As President Xi works to prove himself an ally to the people, we can expect netizens to reciprocate by showing him what their demands are in a leader.\(^9\) One can also expect the government will react to netizen demands carefully, permitting small protests on an arbitrary, case-by-case basis while blocking them from organizing large scale anti-Party movements.

With regard to protest movements, some scholars suggest netizens will only see change if they seek to work within the confines of the GFW.\(^10\) By advocating achievable change to less sensitive policies, netizens can gain credibility with the Chinese government and lay the groundwork for more expansive political reform in the future. Others posit that the GFW solidifies Party power and engenders support for regime objectives.\(^11\) Netizens condemning the entire system are silenced across the board because there is a common interest among authorities to do so. To this end, navigating within the GFW fortifies the Party’s control because it forces critics to work within its restrictions; moving the process for change forward, these scholars argue, oftentimes calls for protest and more drastic measures.

Both groups of scholars, however, rightly agree that focusing on smaller issues is the best use of time and resources for netizens working for change. China cannot afford to change national policy overnight. Despite the accepted viewpoint that China moves
very quickly with policy reform (e.g., in issues ranging from family planning in the late 1970s to economic development in the 1990s), it is patently ‘un-Chinese’ in nature to be rash, especially when the resulting policy is to be connected to the State and is a policy upon which all Party members are expected to stand. The “Reform and Opening Up” policies of 1978 have shown China takes its time in developing national strategy, instituting test groups before emerging with a countrywide change of policy. It would be imprudent to assume the Chinese government would not first institute a test group for an internet system that allows increased access to information before opening the rights up to all citizens.

The discussion on the legitimacy of the GFW, its government supporters, and disgruntled netizens is gaining momentum. A world where China’s one-party government and open access to information coexist is not impossible and it is the hope of many netizens that this dream will be actualized. Yet netizens are familiar enough with the Chinese government to know that any change will take some time to achieve. Luckily for netizens, government representatives are aging, and a new string of younger representatives will eventually come to power; representatives who enjoy using Weibo to connect with friends and iPhones to access news. This could eventually work to netizens’ advantage, since they would appeal to the sensibilities of leaders who grew up in the computer age. Although the complete breakdown of internet censorship might not be possible in the foreseeable future, netizens are young and adaptable. They have all the time in the world to wait, slowly poking holes in the Great Firewall.

– Denise Lim served as lead editor for this op-ed.

NOTES

3 Ibid.
9 Chin and Spegele, “Censorship Protest.”