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## Bloggers Who Pursue Change Confront Fear And Mistrust

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BEIJING -- When Zhao Jing moved his blog to Microsoft's popular MSN Spaces site last summer, some users worried the Chinese government would block the entire service. The censors had blacklisted the last site where the young journalist had posted his spirited political essays, and he seemed unwilling to tone down his writing at the new address.

But Zhao, better known by the pen name Anti, told fellow bloggers not to worry. If the government objected to his blog, he predicted, Microsoft would "sell me out" and delete it rather than risk being blocked from computer screens across China.

He was right. Four and a half months after he began posting essays challenging the Communist Party's taboo against discussing politics, Zhao published an item protesting the purge of a popular newspaper's top editors. Officials called Microsoft to complain, and Microsoft quickly erased his blog.

The December incident sparked outrage among bloggers around the world, and in Washington, members of Congress vowed to scrutinize how U.S. firms are helping the Chinese government censor the Internet. But the reaction inside China's growing community of Internet users was strikingly mixed.

Many rallied to support Zhao, but some objected to his "Western" views and said he deserved to be silenced. Others, especially those with a financial stake in the industry, said they worried Zhao's writing could lead officials to impose tighter controls on blogging. And a few said they were pleased that Microsoft had been forced to comply with the same censorship rules that its Chinese rivals obey.

The story of Zhao's blog -- and the ambivalence it met in cyberspace -- demonstrates that those trying to use the Internet to foster political change in China must contend not only with the censors but also with the apathy, fear and mistrust of their fellow citizens. The case also highlights the competing ethical and commercial pressures on companies seeking to profit from the Internet in China, including U.S. firms such as Microsoft, Yahoo and Google.

With as many as 16 million people in China writing blogs, the Internet has provided a platform for citizens to express their views, shattering the Communist Party's monopoly on the media. The state still controls newspaper, magazine and book publishing, but the proliferation of sites that let users publish and even broadcast audio and video online have undermined the party's ability to restrict who can address the public and attract an audience.

Many have used the Internet to produce essays, books and even underground films that question the party's

authority. But surveys show most Internet users are members of the urban elite who are benefiting from China's booming economy and have avoided writing about politics.

As a result, people using the Internet to pursue change often encounter resistance, both from those hostile to their views and from others who sympathize but worry that pushing too hard could imperil the freedoms already gained on the Web.

The Internet firms empowering Chinese confront different problems. To build audiences, they often push the censors' limits by offering users an extra bit of news or freedom. But because they need government licenses, there is also an incentive for them to curry favor with the censors. In addition, U.S. firms such as Microsoft must face critics who say they have a duty to do more than their Chinese rivals to promote freedom.

After Zhao's blog was deleted, he posted a message online cursing Microsoft and the young Chinese programmers who are helping the Communist Party censor the Internet. But a few weeks later, he moderated his criticism of Microsoft, still expressing anger but also noting that MSN Spaces remains China's most lightly censored blog site.

"In this political system, everyone has to compromise," Zhao said. "It's not black and white. Many of the people who delete my essays are also my friends."

### **Taking On Microsoft**

Blogging arrived in China in the summer of 2002 as a response to censorship, but not by the government. Fang Xingdong, the author of a book that attacked Microsoft's market dominance as a threat to national security, said he created one of the country's first blogs after an essay he wrote about Microsoft disappeared from chat forums.

Although Microsoft denied it, Fang concluded the company had pressured the sites to erase his essay. When he posted it on his new blog, he realized he was using technology that could change China.

"The more I thought about it, the more excited I was," said Fang, now the chairman of Bokee, China's largest blog service provider. "I felt I had seen the future of the Internet. . . . Each individual would have the power to fully express his creativity."

Fang said he believed, then as now, that big corporations like Microsoft presented the greatest threat to freedom of speech on the Internet, not government censors. But when he launched his firm, he said, he devoted meeting after meeting to persuading party officials to accept blogging.

"At the time, they thought, 'If everyone can publish, wouldn't we lose control?' " Fang said. "But I argued that a blog is like a person's home, and very few people would put something inappropriate in their home."

Fang's company, and others like it, expanded quickly as millions of Chinese embraced blogs as a channel to express themselves and an alternative to the bland fare on state media. Pioneers using pen names such as Mu Zimei, a young reporter who detailed her sexual escapades online, and Meizi, a housewife who described the meals she prepared daily, attracted huge audiences, demonstrating the potential of the Internet to render the party's culture czars irrelevant.

Like most journalists, Zhao Jing dismissed the blogosphere at first. But near the end of 2004, the slim, fast-talking native of southern China began to see it as a potential medium for journalism.

Zhao, 30, was a news junkie, a former computer technician who got his start in newspapers when an editor spotted a political essay he posted on an Internet bulletin board. He picked the pen name Anti because he believed it reflected his contrarian spirit, and in 2003, he was one of the few Chinese reporters to travel to Iraq to cover the war.

But the Communist Party shut down his newspaper, the 21st Century World Herald, after it published a retired official's call for political reform, and Zhao was summoned home before the war began. Despondent, he quit and turned to the foreign press, working briefly as a researcher in the Beijing bureau of The Washington Post before moving to the local office of the New York Times.

He launched his blog in December 2004 with high hopes. "Most blogs were diaries or entertainment, but I wanted to do something different," he said. "I wanted to produce a high-quality blog about politics, like a column, with each entry good enough to publish in a newspaper or magazine."

Zhao polished his writing before posting it. He gave each entry a strong headline and an eye-catching photo. In the beginning, he spent \$60 a month to buy ads on Google that would appear when users searched for information on hot political issues.

"Anti's Daily Thoughts on Politics and Journalism" tackled a variety of subjects, from public attitudes in Jordan toward the war in Iraq, to the growth of democracy in Taiwan, to the state of Chinese journalism. Zhao generally refrained from topics sure to upset the censors. But his political views were clear.

"I thought of myself as a salesman, and what I was selling was the concept of democracy," he said. "People think discussing politics is dangerous, but I wanted them to relax, to see it was normal and that it's not so sensitive."

By July, Zhao said, his blog was getting 7,000 visitors a day.

Then, in August, he posted a copy of a letter by an editor at the China Youth Daily who had attacked a plan to muzzle the paper's reporters. Hours later, the government blocked access to his blog, and every other blog on Blog-City, the overseas site where he had set up his page.

Zhao posted a message apologizing to his fellow bloggers for cutting them off from their readers in China. Then he moved to MSN Spaces.

## **A Joint Venture**

Microsoft has struggled in China. Piracy of its software is rampant, and much of the public sees the company as a foreign bully. Analysts believe it is losing money here. When it launched its free blogging platform last May, part of the Chinese version of its MSN.com portal site, it hoped to turn things around.

The site was the result of years of negotiations with Chinese officials. Microsoft lined up the Beijing Youth Daily, a state-owned newspaper, and others to provide content. Just before the launch, it struck a partnership with a state-owned investment firm in Shanghai run by Jiang Mianheng, the son of former president Jiang Zemin. The joint venture marked one of the first times a foreign-invested firm had obtained a license to

provide Internet content in China.

Free speech advocates quickly attacked Microsoft for preventing Chinese bloggers from using words such as "freedom" and "democracy" in the titles of their blog entries. But MSN Spaces was a hit, and in less than five months, surveys showed it was overtaking Fang Xingdong's Bokee as the most popular blog site in China.

Bloggers flocked to the site because of its superior software, which made it easy to include slideshows and was linked to Microsoft's popular instant-messaging program. But Zhao said he chose MSN Spaces because it seemed less heavily censored than its Chinese competitors.

While Chinese firms used filters to stop bloggers from posting entries with prohibited keywords, Microsoft applied its filter only to the titles of entries. And while Chinese sites often erased politically sensitive content, Microsoft didn't appear to be deleting much. Meanwhile, other foreign blog sites, like Google's Blogger, had been blocked by the government.

"Anti's Blog" thrived at its new address. Zhao continued to write about Taiwan, opposing independence for the island but praising its democracy. He mocked North Korea, picking apart propaganda photos from President Hu Jintao's visit to Pyongyang. He examined the success of a Chinese television program modeled after Fox's "American Idol," comparing it with an experiment in democracy.

But as his audience grew, Zhao exercised more restraint. He worried about the censors. He also knew that swaying China's Internet users would be difficult.

"With more readers, I needed to be more reasonable," he said. "I always said I supported democracy, but I tried to explain it in a sensible way. Otherwise, people would start calling me a traitor or an American running dog."

Occasionally, though, Zhao said he felt he had to speak out, no matter how sensitive the subject. He attended and described the funeral of the ousted party leader who opposed the Tiananmen Square massacre. He defended a teacher fired for discussing the Communist Party's violent past with her students. He wrote about the death of an exiled Chinese journalist.

### **'Huge Obstacle'**

Soon Zhao's blog was receiving an average of 15,000 visitors every day, and he was becoming a controversial figure on the Web.

In December, a college senior in the eastern city of Yangzhou posted a tirade calling Zhao a "huge obstacle to the development of Chinese blogging culture" and attacking him for moving his blog to MSN Spaces instead of a Chinese site.

The student, Zhang Ming, also called on the government to protect the country's own Internet firms, to be more vigilant about monitoring and censoring Microsoft's site and to investigate the "illegal services" it offered.

"Anti has become an ad for the fake freedom offered by foreign blog service providers, as if the existence of Anti implies that freedom of speech is preserved," he wrote.

The essay was featured on Bokee, and Zhao responded by demanding the firm clarify whether it shared the student's views. Bokee then deleted Zhang's essay.

But Fang, the Bokee chairman, also expressed concern about Zhao. "I understand his views, but I don't agree with his methods," he said. "If you use blogging as a political tool, you could destroy the development of blogging in China. When people like Anti come out, there's a lot of pressure on us. They're pursuing freedom, but it results in less freedom."

One popular Shanghai blogger, who declined to be identified, compared Zhao to an airline passenger who stands up and curses hijackers. "He makes the other passengers uncomfortable and nervous," the blogger said. "What he is saying might be right, but it makes the situation unpredictable, and perhaps more dangerous for everyone."

The situation came to a head in late December after the party replaced the top editors of the Beijing News, a scrappy tabloid that Zhao admired for its aggressive reporting. Zhao said he knew it was risky to write about, but decided he could not stay silent.

He expressed disgust on his blog and urged readers to cancel their subscriptions to the newspaper in protest.

One day later, on Dec. 30, the Shanghai Municipal Information Office, an arm of the party's propaganda department, called Microsoft's joint venture.

Zhang Xiaoyu, a senior official in the agency, said the government told Microsoft to remove Zhao's blog because it contained comments on the news, and only Chinese Web sites with licenses could publish such material. He said bloggers were barred from writing about "political, economic, military or diplomatic news."

Microsoft, which by then was hosting 3.3 million blogs in China, deleted Zhao's blog the next day. A company official said the Internet laws are vague and selectively enforced, and managers were caught off-guard by the request. He said Microsoft decided to comply because it came from an agency with regulatory authority.

Many bloggers rallied to support Zhao, and several used their Microsoft blogs to post copies of his next essay blasting the computer engineers who help censor the Internet. "These political forces are approaching day by day, nibbling at our space, our ideals," wrote one, a Beijing journalist. Isaac Mao, co-founder of one of China's first blogging firms, suggested a boycott of Microsoft.

Others defended Microsoft, saying the Chinese people should blame the censors, or themselves, for doing nothing to fight them.

Microsoft launched a policy review, then announced it would take down blogs only when it received notice from the government. By contrast, Chinese Internet firms often censor themselves without waiting for the authorities to call.

Microsoft also said it would disclose the government order when it removed a blog. The company has taken down at least four blogs since then, including one in which the offending material appeared to be a discussion of its new policy.

Meanwhile, a Microsoft executive called Zhao and offered to send a CD with a backup of his deleted blog. Zhao, who now writes on an overseas site the government tries to block, said he was happy to receive the call, but surprised to learn it involved another compromise: Microsoft said it could only send the disc to an address outside China.

*Researcher Greg Distelhorst contributed to this report.*

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