

## Behind the Great Firewall of China – Speech of Michael Anti (Jing Zhao) at TED

0:15 In the past several days, I heard people talking about China. And also, I talked to friends about China and Chinese Internet. Something is very challenging to me. I want to make my friends understand: China is complicated. So I always want to tell the story, like, one hand it is that, the other hand is that. You can't just tell a one sided story. I'll give an example. China is a BRIC country. BRIC country means Brazil, Russia, India and China. This emerging economy really is helping the revival of the world economy. But at the same time, on the other hand, China is a SICK country, the terminology coined by Facebook IPO papers -- file. He said the SICK country means Syria, Iran, China and North Korea. The four countries have no access to Facebook. So basically, China is a SICK BRIC country.

1:23 (Laughter)

1:24 Another project was built up to watch China and Chinese Internet. And now, today I want to tell you my personal observation in the past several years, from that wall. So, if you are a fan of the Game of Thrones, you definitely know how important a big wall is for an old kingdom. It prevents weird things from the north.

1:51 Same was true for China. In the north, there was a great wall, Chang Cheng. It protected China from invaders for 2,000 years. But China also has a great firewall. That's the biggest digital boundary in the whole world. It's not only to defend the Chinese regime from overseas, from the universal values, but also to prevent China's own citizens to access the global free Internet, and even separate themselves into blocks, not united.

2:28 So, basically the "Internet" has two Internets. One is the Internet, the other is the Chinanet. But if you think the Chinanet is something like a deadland, wasteland, I think it's wrong. But we also use a very simple metaphor, the cat and the mouse game, to describe in the past 15 years the continuing fight between Chinese censorship, government censorship, the cat, and the Chinese Internet users. That means us, the mouse. But sometimes this kind of a metaphor is too simple.

3:12 So today I want to upgrade it to 2.0 version. In China, we have 500 million Internet users. That's the biggest population of Netizens, Internet users, in the whole world. So even though China's is a totally censored Internet, but still, Chinese Internet society is really booming. How to make it? It's simple. You have Google, we have Baidu. You have Twitter, we have Weibo. You have Facebook, we have Renren. You have YouTube, we have Youku and Tudou. The Chinese government blocked every single international Web 2.0 service, and we Chinese copycat every one.

4:03 (Laughter)

4:05 So, that's the kind of the thing I call smart censorship. That's not only to censor you. Sometimes this Chinese national Internet policy is very simple: Block and clone. On the one hand, he wants to satisfy people's need of a social network, which is very important; people really love social networking. But on the other hand, they want to keep the server in Beijing so they can access the data any time they want. That's also the reason Google was pulled out from China, because they can't accept the fact that Chinese government wants to keep the server.

4:47 Sometimes the Arab dictators didn't understand these two hands. For example, Mubarak, he shut down the Internet. He wanted to prevent the Netizens [from criticizing] him. But once Netizens can't go online, they go in the street. And now the result is very simple. We all know Mubarak is technically dead. But also, Ben Ali, Tunisian president, didn't follow the second rule. That means keep the server in your hands. He allowed Facebook, a U.S.-based service, to continue

to stay on inside of Tunisia. So he can't prevent it, his own citizens to post critical videos against his corruption. The same thing happened. He was the first to topple during the Arab Spring.

5:46 But those two very smart international censorship policies didn't prevent Chinese social media [from] becoming a really public sphere, a pathway of public opinion and the nightmare of Chinese officials. Because we have 300 million microbloggers in China. It's the entire population of the United States. So when these 300 million people, microbloggers, even they block the tweet in our censored platform. But itself -- the Chinanet -- but itself can create very powerful energy, which has never happened in the Chinese history.

6:30 2011, in July, two [unclear] trains crashed, in Wenzhou, a southern city. Right after the train crash, authorities literally wanted to cover up the train, bury the train. So it angered the Chinese Netizens. The first five days after the train crash, there were 10 million criticisms of the posting on social media, which never happened in Chinese history. And later this year, the rail minister was sacked and sentenced to jail for 10 years.

7:06 And also, recently, very funny debate between the Beijing Environment Ministry and the American Embassy in Beijing because the Ministry blamed the American Embassy for intervening in Chinese internal politics by disclosing the air quality data of Beijing. So, the up is the Embassy data, the PM 2.5. He showed 148, they showed it's dangerous for the sensitive group. So a suggestion, it's not good to go outside. But that is the Ministry's data. He shows 50. He says it's good. It's good to go outside. But 99 percent of Chinese microbloggers stand firmly on the Embassy's side. I live in Beijing. Every day, I just watch the American Embassy's data to decide whether I should open my window.

8:15 Why is Chinese social networking, even within the censorship, so booming? Part of the reason is Chinese languages. You know, Twitter and Twitter clones have a kind of a limitation of 140 characters. But in English it's 20 words or a sentence with a short link. Maybe in Germany, in German language, it may be just "Aha!"

8:37 (Laughter)

8:39 But in Chinese language, it's really about 140 characters, means a paragraph, a story. You can almost have all the journalistic elements there. For example, this is Hamlet, of Shakespeare. It's the same content. One, you can see exactly one Chinese tweet is equal to 3.5 English tweets. Chinese is always cheating, right? So because of this, the Chinese really regard this microblogging as a media, not only a headline to media.

9:18 And also, the clone, Sina company is the guy who cloned Twitter. It even has its own name, with Weibo. "Weibo" is the Chinese translation for "microblog". It has its own innovation. At the commenting area, [it makes] the Chinese Weibo more like Facebook, rather than the original Twitter. So these innovations and clones, as the Weibo and microblogging, when it came to China in 2009, it immediately became a media platform itself. It became the media platform of 300 million readers. It became the media. Anything not mentioned in Weibo, it does not appear to exist for the Chinese public.

10:03 But also, Chinese social media is really changing Chinese mindsets and Chinese life. For example, they give the voiceless people a channel to make your voice heard. We had a petition system. It's a remedy outside the judicial system, because the Chinese central government wants to keep a myth: The emperor is good. The old local officials are thugs. So that's why the petitioner, the victims, the peasants, want to take the train to Beijing to petition to the central government, they want the emperor to settle the problem. But when more and more people go to Beijing, they also cause the risk of a revolution. So they send them back in recent years. And even some of them were put into black jails. But now we have Weibo, so I call it the Weibo petition. People just use

their cell phones to tweet.

10:58 So your sad stories, by some chance your story will be picked up by reporters, professors or celebrities. One of them is Yao Chen, she is the most popular microblogger in China, who has about 21 million followers. They're almost like a national TV station. If you -- so a sad story will be picked up by her. So this Weibo social media, even in the censorship, still gave the Chinese a real chance for 300 million people every day chatting together, talking together. It's like a big TED, right? But also, it is like the first time a public sphere happened in China. Chinese people start to learn how to negotiate and talk to people.

11:50 But also, the cat, the censorship, is not sleeping. It's so hard to post some sensitive words on the Chinese Weibo. For example, you can't post the name of the president, Hu Jintao, and also you can't post the city of Chongqing, the name, and until recently, you can't search the surname of top leaders. So, the Chinese are very good at these puns and alternative wording and even memes. They even name themselves -- you know, use the name of this world-changing battle between the grass-mud horse and the river crab. The grass-mud horse is caoníma, is the phonogram for motherfucker, the Netizens call themselves. River crab is héxiè, is the phonogram for harmonization, for censorship. So that's kind of a caoníma versus the héxiè, that's very good. So, when some very political, exciting moments happened, you can see on Weibo, you see a lot of very weird stories happened. Weird phrases and words, even if you have a PhD of Chinese language, you can't understand them.

13:10 But you can't even expand more, no, because Chinese Sina Weibo, when it was founded was exactly one month after the official blocking of Twitter.com. That means from the very beginning, Weibo has already convinced the Chinese government, we will not become the stage for any kind of a threat to the regime. For example, anything you want to post, like "get together" or "meet up" or "walk," it is automatically recorded and data mined and reported to a poll for further political analyzing. Even if you want to have some gathering, before you go there, the police are already waiting for you. Why? Because they have the data. They have everything in their hands. So they can use the 1984 scenario data mining of the dissident. So the crackdown is very serious.

14:07 But I want you to notice a very funny thing during the process of the cat-and-mouse. The cat is the censorship, but Chinese is not only one cat, but also has local cats. Central cat and local cats.

14:21 (Laughter)

14:23 You know, the server is in the [central] cats' hands, so even that -- when the Netizens criticize the local government, the local government has not any access to the data in Beijing. Without bribing the central cats, he can do nothing, only apologize.

14:40 So these three years, in the past three years, social movements about microblogging really changed local government, became more and more transparent, because they can't access the data. The server is in Beijing. The story about the train crash, maybe the question is not about why 10 million criticisms in five days, but why the Chinese central government allowed the five days of freedom of speech online. It's never happened before. And so it's very simple, because even the top leaders were fed up with this guy, this independent kingdom. So they want an excuse -- public opinion is a very good excuse to punish him.

15:23 But also, the Bo Xilai case recently, very big news, he's a princeling. But from February to April this year, Weibo really became a marketplace of rumors. You can almost joke everything about these princelings, everything! It's almost like you're living in the United States. But if you dare to retweet or mention any fake coup about Beijing, you definitely will be arrested. So this kind of freedom is a targeted and precise window.

15:55 So Chinese in China, censorship is normal. Something you find is, freedom is weird.

Something will happen behind it. Because he was a very popular Leftist leader, so the central government wanted to purge him, and he was very cute, he convinced all the Chinese people, why he is so bad. So Weibo, the 300 million public sphere, became a very good, convenient tool for a political fight.

16:23 But this technology is very new, but technically is very old. It was made famous by Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong, because he mobilized millions of Chinese people in the Cultural Revolution to destroy every local government. It's very simple, because Chinese central government doesn't need to even lead the public opinion. They just give them a target window to not censor people. Not censoring in China has become a political tool.

16:52 So that's the update about this game, cat-and-mouse. Social media changed Chinese mindset. More and more Chinese intend to embrace freedom of speech and human rights as their birthright, not some imported American privilege. But also, it gave the Chinese a national public sphere for people to, it's like a training of their citizenship, preparing for future democracy. But it didn't change the Chinese political system, and also the Chinese central government utilized this centralized server structure to strengthen its power to counter the local government and the different factions.

17:32 So, what's the future? After all, we are the mouse. Whatever the future is, we should fight against the [cat]. There is not only in China, but also in the United States there are some very small, cute but bad cats.

17:50 (Laughter)

17:52 SOPA, PIPA, ACTA, TPP and ITU. And also, like Facebook and Google, they claim they are friends of the mouse, but sometimes we see them dating the cats. So my conclusion is very simple. We Chinese fight for our freedom, you just watch your bad cats. Don't let them hook [up] with the Chinese cats. Only in this way, in the future, we will achieve the dreams of the mouse: that we can tweet anytime, anywhere, without fear.

18:31 (Applause)

18:38 Thank you.

18:40 (Applause)

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