In China's Internet Cafes, Content-Blocking Is Largely Effective

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By Jeff Young

Beijing — Information does not want to be free. It doesn't care, really. Despite the famous aphorism that the Internet inevitably drives openness, information might just as well want to be forgotten about — there's plenty else for people to do in cyberspace that has nothing to do with news, politics, or activism.

That's what I felt after visiting an Internet cafe near Peking University, a smoky basement where more than 50 people played video games, chatted with friends on instant messenger, or watched videos. None of them seemed to be blogging. Or Tweeting (that's blocked here). Or trying to search for information on any of the subjects the Chinese government blocks on the nation's Internet connections.

People I talked with here get it — they know they're not privy to all the information online. "The Chinese government doesn't want people to see some stuff," said Ma Ning, a recent college graduate sitting in the back corner of the cafe chatting online with her friends. And she does see it as a problem. "Because China is not as democratic as you are in the U.S.," she said. But she said she had never tried the services that let Internet users circumvent the "Great Firewall" of China. She's too busy.

A new scholarly book on the culture of Internet cafes in China concludes that the country's content-blocking policies are highly effective — that despite utopian views that the Internet is inherently democratic, it can be subjected to central controls. The book's author is Helen Sun, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, who was born in China and has been traveling back here each summer for her research.

She surveyed patrons and owners of Internet cafes in one unnamed Chinese city over a period of several years and found that information can be locked out — or at least made so much of a hassle to get that it is kept from most people's view.

While Internet cafes are waning in popularity here now that more people have laptops, during the early years of Ms. Sun's study they were a key access point for many Chinese college students. In an interview last month, she said that she believes hers is the first book on Chinese Internet cafes.

In most of the professor's surveys, she found that Internet-cafe users, most of them college students, primarily checked e-mail, chatted online, or played video games. Only 19 percent in her most recent survey, conducted last year, said they participated in group discussions online. "This study finds that Internet users in Net bars are more likely to perceive and use the Internet as a means of entertainment and

Cafe patrons told her that the blocking policies did not really have an effect on them, and many even agreed with the government's argument that the restrictions help society. "While they claimed to believe the regulations were good for the stability of society," she writes, "they stated that those same regulations were irrelevant to their situation, perhaps because they did not think they would play any role in public affairs."

I found the same pattern in the cafe I visited. Wang Leikai, a 24-year-old supermarket employee watching a friend play the video game Dragon Bone, said he did not feel deprived of Twitter, YouTube, or other Western sites because he could visit local versions of those sites in China that offer similar features. "I don't think people would be interested," he told me.

Ms. Sun argues that in some ways government officials in China can exert more control over information than when print media dominated the landscape. Officials can not only stop some content; they can also watch what articles are being read, and by whom. In fact, users of Internet cafes here have to sign in and present ID to use the computers, and the log book is handed in to authorities, said Ms. Sun.

Yet Ms. Sun's nuanced book — which has a deceptively straightforward title, *Internet Policy in China* (Lexington Books) — does point out that in some cases Chinese do use the Internet for public discussion and dissent. For instance, some discussion forums on the country's most popular search engine, Baidu, get five million posts a day.

Ms. Ning, whom I talked to in the Internet cafe, said she did regularly visit one site where people post articles from the West that are blocked in China. At least, when she has time.

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