

Waxman was raised by a struggling Jewish family working its way out of the Depression in Los Angeles. After fighting his way, with a few lucky breaks and a law degree, to the California State Assembly in 1968, he positioned himself in 1974 for a newly created seat in the House of Representatives and won a subcommittee chairmanship only five years later.

In their respective halls of Congress, Kennedy and Waxman became similarly known as masters of the legislative process, combining liberal political ideals with a willingness to work with opponents to get things done. During long

careers, both have produced remarkable legislative records in domains in which science is important, including health care and regulatory policy — yet without ever serving on those all-powerful appropriations committees. In this slim volume, we learn how Waxman did it. ■

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inside China was the founding in 1995 of the Tsinghua Bulletin Board System (BBS), which was started by students at the computer-science department of Tsinghua University, where I was an undergraduate. Even today, with the prevalence of text messaging, blogs, YouTube and Twitter, the BBS continues to be a widely used online platform in China, and its underlying technology has progressed from dial-up connections to broadband networks.

Although filled with vivid anecdotes, this book is an academic publication. Its storytelling is punctuated by jargon and scholarly narratives, including numerous academic references. Nonetheless, it is a valuable information resource. Yang's analysis covers a broad canvas and includes many statistics. The investigation into the business side of online activism will particularly fascinate many readers. Online viewings surely translate into money, and manufactured online contention generates lots of viewings. Some businesses, including art dealers, present items as 'banned in China' to promote their wares. Also a reality are competitive tactics, such as the '50 cents party' — people who are paid 50 cents an item for posting prescribed messages at online forums.

Governmental control of content is the elephant in the room. The mechanisms for restricting content flow into China and for controlling domestic Internet content — down to a single book entry on Amazon, for example — have become sophisticated in recent years. This is aided by the fact that only a few state-owned access points connect the domestic Internet to the outside world. Chinese 'netizens' counter these constraints with ingenuity, such as using Internet proxies to bypass state firewalls, or posting opinions in unrelated forums to postpone detection. The Chinese habit of reposting — in which a user copies an article in its entirety to a new forum, rather than linking to the original posting — makes the job of eradicating an erratic blog much harder.

Sixteen years ago this month, media magnate Rupert Murdoch declared that "advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere." Last year, China overtook the United States as the country with the largest online population. In the time between, Yang's book documents how China's netizens have stumbled on online activism as a response to, among other things, a flawed justice system. Time will tell whether the revolution in communication technologies will lead to a new cultural or social revolution. ■

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## China's unofficial democracy

### The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online

by Guobin Yang

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In July this year, a 20-year-old university student in the southern Chinese city of Hangzhou was sentenced to three years in prison for driving recklessly and killing a pedestrian. This would have been a sad but unremarkable case, except that it was only brought following a huge national outcry. Reports that local police initially protected the student, whose family was well connected, were spread over the Internet and eventually forced the police to respond.

Similar examples of online citizen activism occur every day. *The Power of the Internet in China* analyses how the Internet's rapid development in China has given its citizens a mechanism to air and share individual opinions that may differ from official positions, to connect and organize often against the will of the authorities, and to improve their own lives directly and visibly. The Internet allows Chinese citizens to practise, as cultural critic Raymond Williams termed it, "unofficial democracy".

In researching the book, Guobin Yang, a professor at Columbia University who grew up in China, read Chinese material first-hand, observed and participated in online forums and interacted with Chinese citizens online. The book's 70 case studies range from patients with diabetes or hepatitis B fighting against governmental employment discrimination, to Internet-organized worldwide demonstrations in response to the 1998 Indonesian atrocities towards the local ethnic Chinese population, to massive online and offline protests over news reporting by Western media in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Yang's recounting of notable events along the historical path to China's online activism brought back old memories of my own. The first electronic gathering place targeted at people interested in China — the USENET newsgroup soc.culture.china — was started soon after I left Beijing for Cambridge, UK, in late 1987. I quickly became an active participant, devoting entire mornings to reading and replying to postings. As a student, I helped edit *China News Digest*, the first China-themed English-language electronic newsletter, which was published free by e-mail.

The milestone event for the citizens' Internet



China's online community has found its own voice.