**The proof is in the pendulum: a history of digital activism and repressions**

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Purist arguments of cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism are becoming [increasingly irrelevant](http://www.meta-activism.org/2011/08/complex-and-contradictory-a-new-way-to-think-of-digital-technologys-effects/) as evidence of digital technology’s ability to both empower and repress accumulates. However, what is the basis of this argument beyond anecdotalism of a slightly broader scope?

I would argue that **in the past five year we have witnessed a pendulum swing from activist advantage to government revanche** **to dense tactical contention between the two**. According to the initial findings of the [Global Digital Activism Data Set](http://www.meta-activism.org/data-set/), digital activism (cases of digital technology use to achieve social or political change) did not really take off until the second half of the first decade of this millennium. Though there were a few politically-themed BBS forums in the 1980’s, the graph below shows that that the first real emergence correlates to the commercialization of the World Wide Web and Internet services in the late 1990’s, while the appearance of exponential growth correlates to the emergence of social media (public Facebook, 2006; YouTube, 2005; Twitter, 2006).

Between initial emergence and exponential growth, the pendulum swung back and digital repression began. The most sophisticated and influential censorship system, the Chinese firewall, began development in 1998 and was launched in 2003. As the first wave to social media users, bloggers were also the first to be repressed. That same year, in Iran, Sina Motellabi became the first blogger arrested for political activities. [The OpenNet Initiative](http://opennet.net/), a project to “investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices” began work in 2004. In 2007 the international blog aggregator Global Voices launched its [Advocacy](http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/about/)project, “dedicated to protecting freedom of expression and free access to information online.”

**From the beginning, we can see this history as a swinging pendulum in which activists tactically innovate and repressive governments respond**. It could be argued that the first instance of the effective use of digital tactics in furtherance of an activist campaign (as opposed to as a reporting mechanism) was the use of the web [in 1994 by Mexico’s Zapatistas](http://learn.bowdoin.edu/courses/soc022-richard-joyce/2010/04/zapatista-solidarity-online-a-case-study-of-internet-activism/). Though governments began to take action against thrill-seeking hackers as early as 1990’s [Operation Sundevil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Sundevil), and China began licensing access and persecuting criminal activities in 1994, I would argue that the first instance of digital repression was the December 1997 issuance of updates to the Security Management Procedures in Internet Accessing, a regulation issued by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security that [allowed](http://www.wqzaixian.com/2011/04) the government to levy fines for “defaming government agencies,” “splitting the nation,” and leaking “state secrets.” Unlike [previous Internet regulation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China#Beginning_of_Regulations) regarding access licensing and cyber-crime [and censorship of pornography](http://www.scribd.com/doc/2471757/The-Internet-and-Political-Control-in-Singapore), this regulation is the first I’ve found to specifically target anti-regime political speech (though a [1996 Singaporean regulation](http://www.meta-activism.org/2011/09/the-proof-is-in-the-pendulum-a-history-of-digital-activism-and-repression/%22contents%20which%20undermine%20the%20public%20confidence%20in%20the%20administration%20of%20justice.%22) censoring “contents which undermine the public confidence in the administration of justice” brushes very close to that line).

There has even been a pendular motion in the recognition of the effects of digital activism and digital repression on global politics. Clay Shirky’s cyber-optimist tome [*Here Comes Everybody*](http://www.amazon.com/Here-Comes-Everybody-Organizing-Organizations/dp/0143114948/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1314887229&sr=8-1) was published in 2009, while Evgeny Morozov’s cyber-pessimist counter-work [*The Net Delusion*](http://www.amazon.com/Net-Delusion-Dark-Internet-Freedom/dp/1586488740/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1314887269&sr=8-1) was published in early 2011. Now, thanks to the Arab Spring, we are back to focusing on digital activism.

This pendular motion continues into the present day, with digital tactics and counter-tactics most recently exhibited in Egypt, where activists used the Internet to define the political contest and mobilize supporters and the government responded by shutting the whole system down. Though the activists eventually won in Egypt, it seems that forces of digital repression (both government agents and pro-government citizens) now have the [upper](http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/04/18/spam-bots-flooding-twitter-to-drown-info-about-syria-protests/) [hand](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/08/syrias-digital-counter-revolutionaries/244382/) in Syria.

This pendular motion of tactical innovation and government response was previously referred to as a [cat-and-mouse game by Patrick Meier](http://irevolution.net/2009/11/19/dictators-love-web/) of Ushahidi, who asked in a 2009 blog post:

*Is this formidable mix [of a political will to obstruct and a technically competent bureaucracy] enough to smoke out digital activist networks in authoritarian states?* *“The result,”* *opines Evgeny [Morozov],* *“is a cat-and-mouse game in which protestors try to hide from the authorities by caring [sic.] out unconventional niches.”* *So is Tom-the-cyber-cat going to finally do away with cyber-mouse-Jerry? I’m not ready to place my bets on either Tom or Jerry. I’d rather be up front and say, I don’t know. It depends.*

I’d like to update Patrick’s assertion with a little more certainty: **no one will win the cat-and-mouse game**. Though there is not yet a Global Digital Repression Data Set, I would bet that it would now also exhibit exponential growth as widely-publicized cases of digital activism in the media (and inter-government cooperation) mean repressive governments are becoming ever more savvy about the political uses of digital technology and are developing their own responses. In fact, as governments put more of their significant resources toward the task, I would not be surprised if in the future we see**governments taking the tactical lead and activists taking the reactive position**. This is not to imply that governments will win – the Internet still has significant uses for activists – but it is to say that **neither side is likely to win soon**.

The tactical upper hand is likely to be illusory to both as **activists have greater capacity for creative experimentation**on their side through their greater numbers and a**resilient network infrastructure** while **governments** have**greater financial resources**and**control over that infrastructure**within their territories. Decisions on **privacy and real name policies** will affect the field of play, giving governments an advantage if they are enforced and activists an advantage if they are not. Still, the real tactic battle of digital activist versus repressive government has just begun and the pendulum has just begun to swing.

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