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Information Flow and Control and Their Consequences in Countering the 21st Century

Threats of Terrorism

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The spirit of these times is quite different from the spirit of the rolling good times at the end of the last millennium. The mood of optimism has been very much tempered by caution and even fear in the light of September 11 attacks in the USA and the deadly SARS epidemic in Asia. The paradigm of freer speech (if not free speech) has risen in tandem with the rise in significance of the Information Age, But, of late, the paradigm has also begun to pale. The current mood raises questions about the limits of the free speech doctrine as propounded by the US and the Western countries.

Greater information flow has been necessary to compel the Chinese government to announce the outbreak of SARS in China. Because the news about the outbreak was hushed up, the outbreak was not contained in time and so spread from the south of China to Beijing. (Shanghai was apparently also affected but the Chinese government's response to that was to bundle away those infected in or near Shanghai; the aim was to avoid tarnishing the image of Shanghai as the most vibrant Chinese city.) Chinese researchers have found that news about the outbreak spread not through the internet, but through the mobile phone and through text messages. The Chinese government did attempt to stifle the news and arrested at least one person for spreading such news using the mobile phone. But it was too little too late. Faced with widespread scepticism, and also international pressure, the Chinese government finally owned up and confronted the harsh reality.

The lesson here is not that the Chinese do not trust the local news because once the news was made public and official, the Chinese were tuning to the traditional and mainstream source of media: the local radio and television stations and buying the local newspapers. The lesson rather is that the freer information flow is harder to control: citizens will compare the news. Where the official version is censored, they will revert to other sources.

However, once the news was official, there in fact arose the need to minimize misinformation and also control information. Singapore is often cited as a model for how SARS was quickly brought under control. Certainly, one of the reasons it was able to enforce quarantine, but no means the only reason, was the use of information by government. School children were asked if they had left the country; immigration control fed information about those who had left the country to the school principals. Parents who told their children to lie that they had not left the country when they had were called up by schools. No one who lied about leaving the country was ever infected while away. But here is an important lesson: in times of crises, government control of information

can be handy.

This raises questions about the present: how much of a crisis does the world see itself in? The USA certainly sees itself as being in crisis, a crisis caused by terrorism. In Singapore, a group of men suspected of links to the Jemaah Islamiah network were detained under the Internal Security Act, which allows for indefinite detention without trial. Malaysia took similar action against members of similar cells using the same law. By any measure, the ISA, which came to Commonwealth countries through the British when they were colonial masters, is a draconian piece of legislation and has been criticized by the US before. In both Singapore and Malaysia, the Internal Security Act has been used against newspaper editors. This time around, both Singapore and Malaysia were praised by the USA for the arrests. Another lesson here: in times of crises, short-circuiting civil liberties can be very handy.

However, what is the cost of such controls?

In the year 2000, the US government organized a special by-invitation meeting by the National Intelligence Council to look at how the technology boom might be sustained. Its concern was that the seeds of the boom were sown by the World War and the Cold War. The computer was invented to calculate the trajectory of artillery shells. The internet was invented to circumvent breaks in communication. It took years for those inventions to lead to commercial exploitation and to give the USA its technological edge and economic power. Now that the wars are over, what kind of research should be done so as to lay the seeds for the next wave of technological boom for the USA?

As far as I can tell, the meeting ended without firm conclusions beyond a call for a second meeting the following year, opening up the meeting to Europe and then to Asia. Well, the one in Europe was held in 2001 but the one in Asia, which should have been held in 2002, was moved from Singapore to Hawaii because of security concerns and then called off, because of security concerns. And that in fact may be the answer: the next wave of technological inventions is likely to come from our current reaction to terrorists and terrorism.

The US response to terrorism is having an impact not only on information flows but also people flow. Until the restrictions on visa issuance, many Chinese students had simply looked to the US to study there. But with the restrictions, Chinese students who used to look to the USA are now looking elsewhere?to Asia, Europe and Australia. Because these are academically very bright students who are lacking only opportunities and exposure, they will impact research in Asia and China in the coming years. This means that the flow of information will gradually move away from being heavily centred on North America and Europe to being more Asia-focussed. This move will of course

develop over the decades as the West has a commanding lead.

There are also sound commercial reasons for conducting research on Asia. Japan leads the world in advanced mobile telephony?the i-Mode. South Korea leads the world in broadband penetration. In both instances, there are some specific cultural reasons for the lead. However, the point is that it is not always the West that eventually leads in technology. However, much work needs to be done to study and understand the phenomena of usage and the impact on the individual and on society.