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## China's growing cyberculture doesn't guarantee political freedom

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Washington, April 30 (IANS) China's rapidly growing cyberculture doesn't guarantee political freedom and open speech, conclude researchers from an American university.

The study, conducted by communication researchers at the University of Buffalo (UB), responds to claims that widespread use of blogs threatens Chinese government control over democratic discourse, free speech and civil rights in China's traditionally closed society.

'Some hold that advanced technology and the free flow of information make the Internet uncontrollable,' said Junhao Hong, UB professor of communication.

'But there has apparently been no diminution in Chinese government surveillance, and Internet censorship could continue to be one of the most pervasive barriers to regime change,' says Hong.

It is widely acknowledged that Internet regulation (or repression) is more extensive and advanced in China than in any other nation.

The government employs a broad range of laws and regulations to block website content and monitor access of individuals to the Internet.

It expects branches of state-owned ISPs, organisations and international companies, including Yahoo, Google and Microsoft, to implement these measures.

Hong and his co-author Shaojung Sharon Wang acknowledge that 'the rapidly transforming blogosphere could be a catalyst for social change and organised political discourse.'

In fact, Hong and Wang conclude that the growth of the Chinese blogosphere -- from 230,000 to 16 million in only six years - facilitates surveillance of the kind used by the Chinese government to control free expression.

However, they add that the battle between the Chinese authoritarian government, which wants censorship and supremacy, and Internet activists seeking to overcome governmental control, will continue for the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, Hong says: 'Although the change in China's cyberculture is, like all change, inherently contagious and continuous, it is not likely to overcome government regulations that intimidate users.'

One reason for this, he says, is that China's blog regulations require the registration of all non-commercial and personal websites and blogs. This demonstrates that while China encourages economic openness, it maintains strict control over politics and dissent, said a UB release.

Hong points out that blog service providers, which have bloggers' real names, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, are required by the government to monitor content and delete illegal and 'bad' information in a timely manner or terminate service to the offending blogger.

'This arrangement, made official in a 2007 pact signed by at least 20 major blog service providers including Yahoo Inc. and Microsoft Corp., is enough in itself to quell online political dissent,' says Hong.

These findings were published recently in Telematics and Informatics.