Review - Now I Know Who My Comrades Are

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Now I Know Who My Comrades Are: Voices from the Internet Underground
By: Emily Parker
New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014

Now I Know Who My Comrades Are uses storytelling to illustrate the various ways in which states control political discourse within their borders. Author Emily Parker organizes the book into three case studies, each with its own chapter. She focuses on three countries: China, Cuba and Russia. To each she assigns a broad category—respectively, isolation, fear and apathy—that she considers explicative of why citizens are unwilling or unable to communicate freely. Throughout she combines interviews with prominent activists and journalists with her own personal experience to demonstrate that culture and business interests can be just as persuasive as politics and state surveillance.

Through these narratives, Parker shares the challenges that activists face in authoritarian and corrupt countries. In each case, rather than discuss the broader systemic issues of censorship, she focuses on the stories of a small number of activists. This is expected given Parker's past career in journalism. It also makes the book easily digestible. Despite her focus on personal stories, the reader is able to glean a large amount of information about the mechanisms of internet censorship and what can be done to promote freedoms in an otherwise closed society.

The weakness of Parker's approach is that she leaves out information that would give the reader a greater understanding of censorship policies in general and how the activists she features play into the larger ecosystem of political dissidents. She makes few references to outside works or studies done by other researchers and organizations. Furthermore, she fails to provide a framework beyond the stories presented in this book for why she assigned each country its category. The assignments do not seem arbitrary, but an examination of other cases or official policies would have greatly strengthened her choices. Despite these shortcomings, *Now I Know Who My Comrades Are* is an accessible and highly interesting look into the world of censorship and activists who are using digital tools to fight against state repression.

China (Isolation)

Of the three countries profiled, China is arguably the most well known for its government's use of censorship. Recent news stories of Western journalists being denied visas are only a small part of the government's initiatives to control the narratives both within China and without. While Chinese censorship gets a tremendous amount of coverage in Western media, Parker goes further to document the active community of bloggers and activists fighting back.

Featured in this chapter are Michael Anti and He Caitou, both of whom are popular bloggers in China. Anti and Caitou have managed to avoid excessively provoking the government, which has enabled them to continue writing. Dissidents have significant leeway in what they say as long as they do not call for collective action or demonstrations – a policy that Parker does support with external reports and studies. This de facto law is what makes China the country of isolation. A 'netizen' (net-citizen) may think what he or she wants, as long as that thought remains private. The danger lies in sharing these thoughts, connecting with others sharing similar thoughts, and eventually acting upon them. Censors will do whatever is necessary to prevent these connections from happening, whether by deleting

Weibo posts, or arresting dissidents.

Anti learned this the hard way when his blog, at the time hosted by Microsoft, was shut down after he called for popular support of a journalist strike. Since then, he has become acutely skilled at determining the hypothetical ultimate 'line', and not crossing it. While he is surely still on the government's radar, he knows not to push too far. He Caitou, on the other hand, avoids being too political by balancing his critiques. For every politically-minded blog post he writes, he will also write ten more about benign subjects like entertainment news. Caitou also has intimate knowledge of the limits imposed by official censorship, having previously worked as an editor at the major Chinese internet company, Tencent. Caitou is also the creator of a popular website known as *shudong,* or "tree hole", which allows users to make anonymous confessions. Anonymity opens up discussions of cultural taboos and political grievances without fear of retaliation. It also allows people to connect with others, knowing that their thoughts and feelings are shared, without fear of breaking taboos or cultural restrictions. Caitou and Anti, like many others in China, have decided that it is better to work within the rules of the Chinese government, and continue what they are doing, rather than push back too hard and risk punishment.

This chapter also highlights ways that activists circumvent censorship to publicly discuss sensitive political issues. Obfuscation is a popular method for those who wish to post online. Administrators of the popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo, China's online public square, block sensitive keywords. As this process is largely automated, the blocked words can be slightly modified to slip past the filters. This may include deliberate misspellings, using Western characters instead of Chinese ones, or adding extra symbols and characters into the middle of words.

The Chinese activist community also creates significant barriers to entry, apparently as a means of self-preservation. In his interviews with Parker, Caitou mentions that communicating in English is popular, with the language becoming something of "a filter for the most qualified [dissidents]". Caitou even preferred to speak English with Parker face-to-face as he felt safer using that language, far from the reach of censors. The irony is that these methods only contribute to the isolation of political dissidents, as they operate a world apart from the rest of China, at least digitally. But the security these platforms provide them is considered an acceptable tradeoff.

While Parker does an excellent job of examining the ecosystem of bloggers and 'netizens' in China, there is very little discussion of censorship in traditional media outlets. Television, print and radio media are also subject to the same restrictions in China, which are enforced indirectly via methods including government allocation of advertising money and visa restrictions for foreign journalists. Had Parker expanded her scope of analysis to consider these other media outlets, the chapter would have been more complete.

Cuba (Fear)

Cuban authorities do not need the massive government-sponsored surveillance systems of the Chinese. A culture of fear has emerged in Cuba because one can never be certain who is and who is not a government informant. This culture has its origins in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, neighborhood organizations established by Castro in the 1960s to monitor citizens for anti-government activities. These organizations still exist today, and people have been known to inform on subversive friends or relatives for fear of being punished themselves.

It is in this harsh environment that bloggers Laritza Diversant, Reinaldo Escobar, Yoani Sánchez and others operate. Parker regularly describes the Cuban bloggers she profiles as having a different comportment; namely, not showing the same degree of fear that she says is common among most Cubans. Her meetings regularly feature security personnel and surveillance, and at one point she is even held at the border. But, like their fellow activists in other countries, Cuban bloggers consider their ability to speak freely worth the associated risks.

Online activism in Cuba is further limited by the economic conditions of the country. Few Cubans have access to an internet connection, particularly one that is connected to more than just the country's intranet. Diversant and her fellow bloggers instead have to distribute their writing via a "sneakernet"—an informal network that involves carrying data saved on a physical medium to another location for publication, such as a hotel or embassy. Because of the low rate of internet penetration, most bloggers instead choose to publish their critiques of the Cuban diaspora and

outside world on foreign sites and in newspapers.

Parker's chapter on Cuba is the shortest and least developed of the three, which is unsurprising given the country's small blogging community and the reluctance of activists to speak with strangers. It is also understandable that gathering information is limited by the strict controls set by the Cuban government. Nonetheless, further research into the background of authoritarianism and censorship in Cuba would have greatly added to the chapter.

Russia (Apathy)

Russia is unique among the three cases, as the right to peacefully assemble is constitutionally protected. The challenge, instead, is that few Russians actually want to exercise this right. Parker explains that this apathy comes from a feeling among Russians that protests would make little difference, as corruption is so entrenched within the government that they are powerless to initiate change. At one point, Parker noted that she would "spend hours in crowded cafés listening to bloggers and journalists loudly complain about Putin while drinking $8 cappuccinos. Nobody lowered their voices, nobody cared who was sitting at the next table. People could speak freely because their speech ultimately didn't matter."

Blogger Alexey Navalny is one of the few to challenge that notion. The most famous of the bloggers profiled, Navalny rose to prominence as a shareholder activist, purchasing small amounts of stock in Russian companies in order to gain access to their senior leadership. Notable among his accomplishments was an investigation into Russian oil giant Gazprom. Navalny is well aware of Russians' indifference towards political issues and uses this characteristic to develop engagement strategies. Rather than call for protests in the streets, he promotes "slacktivism", encouraging readers of his blog to take action via low barriers to entry. Navalny would provide all of the information needed for petitions and letter-writing campaigns; all the participants would have to do is sign their names and click send. Navalny was also a leading figure behind online transparency tools such as Rosyama, which holds local governments accountable for road repairs, and RosPil, which allows citizens to scrutinize public contracts.

Other activists did their best to encourage their countrymen to action, often by turning political demonstrations into more than just standing with signs and chanting. "Blue bucket protests" were originally founded as a way of expressing anger over the Russian elite's abuse of special blue lights on their cars that allowed them to ignore most traffic laws. People began attaching blue plastic buckets to the roofs of their cars—an act that confounded police. These small acts of civil disobedience became, for many, a source of fun and humor, with websites devoted to sharing videos of blue bucket protests.

Blogger Artem Loskutov began a movement known as "monstrations", which are political demonstrations with an absurdist twist. Monstration participants create nonsense slogans and incorporate performance art, attracting a wide range of creative individuals, including members of the band Pussy Riot. As Loskutov's role as a political organizer grew, he was eventually arrested. However, monstrations continue.

Following the 2012 Duma elections, Russia's "hipster" youth also became major players on the subversive scene. Ilya Klishin, co-creator of the blog *Epic Hero*, became the unlikely leader of this movement. Though his blog promoted political engagement as stylish among Russian youth, Klishin almost by accident served as the organizer for major protests. As demonstrations were announced, he began sharing information on social networks, and the protests' Facebook event pages quickly grew in popularity. Russia's youth are among the first generation of "Western" Russians—young people who have no memory of the Soviet Union, and who are enamored by Western brands like Starbucks and McDonald's. Indeed, Klishin urged protest participants to bring coffee from these restaurants to demonstrations.

The chapter on Russia suffered from the same shortcomings as the chapter on China, insofar as Parker ignored the former Soviet state's non-internet media outlets. While the internet is a unique beast, and Parker's focus is intentional, it takes away from the broader context of political discourse in each country. Otherwise, this section was particularly thorough and compelling, giving a particularly interesting look at the culture behind the protests and the generational shift occurring within Russia.

Conclusion

Emily Parker's *Now I Know Who My Comrades Are* offers a unique perspective on contemporary censorship, illustrating the distinctive and varied political cultures in which it exists. Combined, the case studies show that freedom of speech is not something that can be taken away solely by a state, but also by citizens and individuals therein. The most valuable aspect of the book is its illumination of the diverse methods activists use to thwart censorship, with each unique to the country's own methods of controlling political discourse. The Chinese learned how to circumvent automated filters and party limitations; the Cubans compensated for a lack of technology; and the Russians used humor and style to build a support base. Parker illustrates that the methods for combatting censorship are just as diverse as those used to enforce it.

One noticeable weakness is the failure to draw parallels between each case and the methods of censorship in each state. Brief examples include China and Cuba's efforts to isolate their citizens from Western websites and the apathy shown not only by Chinese 'netizens' but even by the activists themselves to issues of censorship beyond their borders. All three exercise state control over media outlets in order to promote the official narrative, and the threat of imprisonment or even worse is present for dissidents who become too popular and powerful.

As mentioned earlier, Parker's failure to connect the experiences of the profiled activists to those of other dissidents limits the book's academic value. However, this book is just a snapshot of different efforts opposing government control. While not recommended as an academic text, it is an excellent jumping off point for those who wish to learn more about the mechanisms of censorship and how activists are combatting them across the world.

About the author:

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