

Internet Use in China

From: Kate Merkel-Hess and Nicole Gilbertson

History Standards: 10.10

Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in at least two of the following regions or countries: the Middle East, Africa, Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and China.

CCSS Standards: Reading

9. Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Writing

1. Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*.

Guiding Question: How much has the Internet increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States?

Lesson below

How much has the Internet increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States?

When the Internet emerged as a mode of communication to share information and technology, many experts predicted that the open access to knowledge would increase individuals' abilities to develop communities and expand democracy. The idea was this: The Internet would serve as a tool for people to communicate outside government supervision in an environment where freedom of expression and sharing of information is encouraged. With the expansion of this method of communication, people would realize the potentials for freedoms open to them in the world and would agitate for their governments to release controls and restrictions. These energized groups, in the US and outside it, would call on their governments to increase their freedoms and rights so they can benefit from free-flowing information and improve their societies.

While the Internet has increased the speed and volume of communication, the revolutionary aspects of the Internet have not always transformed people into activists for democracy. States like China that control the information flows in their countries have not been overthrown by people seeking more rights. However, people have used the Internet to increase their ability to speak freely and receive information. In this lesson we will consider how the Internet has changed societies and individuals and consider the question: How much has the Internet increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States?

Part 1: The Internet as a mode of Activism

First, we will consider the ways that people use the Internet to gain information and push back against government control. In 2008, a scandal erupted that a poisonous substance was being added to milk products to enhance the profits of some milk producers. People throughout China learned about this not from their government, but through posts on blogs and other sources of information online.

Read the article below by Anna Greenspan excerpted from *China in 2008*. Once you have read the article, discuss and answer the questions.

A few years ago a televised singing competition sponsored by Mengniu, the country's largest dairy producer, became one of the most popular events in China, setting off an intense cultural craze. The *American Idol*-like Mengniu Yoghurt Supergirl Contest drew, in the final show of the second series, a staggering 400 million viewers. During the show's third series, "voters" sent millions of text messages prompting cultural critics to laud Supergirls as China's biggest-ever experiment in grassroots democracy. In a country where branding is still in its infancy, the show was an unprecedented marketing coup and helped secure Mengniu's position at the cutting edge of advertising.

This might seem a surprising role for a dairy company. In China, however, milk has become inextricably linked to modernity.

Traditionally, this disdain for dairy has been a source of cultural pride since the tea-drinking Han sought to distinguish themselves from the milk-drinking barbarians. Foreigners, it was believed, could be easily identified by their buttery, cheesy or milky smell.

Questions:

1. How democratic are shows like *American Idol* or like China's Supergirl Contest? Do you see any correlation between a commercial voting process like these (in which consumers are sometimes charged for their „vote“) and political rights?

As China's doors were opened to the outside, however, and the country began to wonder why it was weak when so many others were strong, the wisdom of the nondairy diet came under fire. The argument was increasingly heard: if China was to match the vitality of the imperial powers, it was essential that its people start drinking milk. Despite this new cultural imperative, for decades consumption was curtailed by poverty. During the Mao era milk was heavily rationed, a luxury that few could afford. Once the country began its policies of openness and reform, however, the milk-drinking campaign exploded.

Since many Chinese adults are lactose-intolerant, the dairy industry focused predominantly on children, since they were not only the prime consumers of milk but also had yet to build up intolerance. The goal was to encourage an early shift in diet that would, ultimately, alter the biology of the population. In China it is widely believed that the Japanese are taller and stronger because they drink more milk. Strengthen the child, and you will strengthen the nation...

In an effort to capitalize on this promotion of both individual and national vitality, dairy ads regularly feature star athletes and patriotic heroes. Mengniu, for example, has a famous product tie-in with the astronauts of the Shenzhou space rocket. Yili, another large dairy producer, sponsors the celebrity hurdler Liu Xiang. This potent mixture of health and patriotism has helped make China home to the fastest-growing dairy market in the world.

The production and distribution of milk in China involves a large number of small and highly distributed players. In September [2008] it came to light that somewhere in this complex business chain melamine, a chemical commonly used in plastics and fertilizers, had been added to the milk supply. Melamine boosts the protein count in milk, allowing unscrupulous traders to disguise a watered-down supply. When ingested in high doses, it also causes crystals to form in the kidneys and eventually leads to kidney stones. A week after the crisis broke, four children were dead and more than 50,000 had been sickened by the country's contaminated milk.

As the crisis unfolded it followed an all-too-familiar pattern. The numbers of those affected jumped suddenly, from 6,000 to more than 50,000, within a couple of days. There were widespread recalls in China and boycotts of Chinese-made goods throughout the rest of the world.

Stories of a cover-up soon emerged. An investigation uncovered health complaints over Sanlu milk powder dating back at least eight months. Parents' concerns had been ignored. Company employees delayed telling local officials, who themselves waited to tell their superiors. The public was kept in the dark until well after the Olympics were over.

Once the story broke there was mass public outcry, and heads began to roll. First, the boss of Sanlu and several local officials were fired and detained. A few days later Li Changjiang, the head of the Chinese agency that monitors food and product quality, was forced to resign. While this was no doubt a necessary measure, it did little to reassure an outraged public...

Responding to the crisis, an official in the agriculture ministry has admitted that "the milk procurement sector is basically uncontrolled" and vowed more stringent regulation. Yet this promise has been made before. The dairy industry, like much else in China, is rife with corruption. It is claimed that the silence of inspectors at Sanlu as well as parents of affected children were bought with bribes.

Only weeks after the leadership in Beijing was praised for the spectacular success of the Olympic Games, the milk crisis revealed the shortcomings of a political system that is grappling with reform. Critics have been quick to suggest that until the government

2. Why is dairy linked to modernity? Why did the Chinese consumers change their minds about drinking milk?

3. How has milk consumption been marketed to Chinese people? How does this compare with milk marketing in the US?

allows more openness, transparency and media oversight, new crises of this type are inevitable.

Here the story so far is mixed. While reports of tainted milk were published in the local press, all news from inside China came from only a few trusted agencies. The content of these reports was strictly regulated by communiqués issued by the propaganda department (some of which circulated on the Internet). Less than two weeks after the story came to light, an initial wave of aggressive coverage gave way to comforting reports about forceful government intervention, as well as articles that focused on the health benefits of milk.

In cyberspace, however, things have unfolded quite differently. From the moment the story appeared, the Chinese blogosphere was flooded with black humor. Images of grotesque monsters promoting baby formula appeared alongside a host of Photoshopped spoof versions of Sanlu ads. A satirical diary was widely circulated that horrifically detailed the daily dose of toxins that everyday life in China entails. Fu Jianfeng, an editor at *Southern Weekend*--one of the most respected papers in the country--blogged about his frustrations in trying to report the case, his inability to access information and the impossibility of investigating Sanlu during the pre-Olympic crackdown. Meanwhile, netizens heatedly debated rumors that Sanlu had paid Baidu, China's biggest search engine, to filter information on the crisis. Paradoxically, this uproar over the lack of information is itself an encouraging sign of the country's increasing openness...

Scrambling for alternatives to local milk, many customers turned to the burgeoning organics market and others switched back to soy milk, a traditional Chinese drink. In the days following the crisis stocks in Vitasoy jumped more than 9 percent.

There are also reports of a sudden and booming industry in wet nurses. One entrepreneurial breast-feeding mother has offered to sell her surplus milk and feed an infant for 300 RMB a day. Her ad was posted online.

4. What was the official government response to the Melamine milk crisis? How does that compare to the U.S. government's responses to domestic food crises?

5. How has the Internet allowed consumers to gain information about the milk crisis?

Analyze the two images that were posted online as a response to the China milk scandal and answer the questions below.

Image 1: "Weapons of Mass Destruction"



- What images are presented in this source? How are the images organized?
- What is the message of this image?
- How is this an example of citizen participation in a larger debate?

Image 2:



- What images are presented in this source? How are the images organized?
- What is the message of this image?
- How is this an example of citizen participation in a larger debate?

Several of those involved in the production and incorporation of melamine into the powdered milk supply were sentenced to death; Sanlu's former chairman has been sentenced to life in prison. Parents' lawsuits have made little progress in the courts or, in many cases, lawyers have simply not been allowed to file suits. Mentions of the scandal have also been tamped down in the press and websites have been closed.

Discussion Question

With regard to the milk crisis, how did the Internet increase citizen participation and expanded civic society in China? Give specific examples to support your conclusion.

Part 2: Comparing Internet Use in China and the US

Now we are going to examine how the Internet is used in China and compare this to what you know about Internet use in the United States. First, we will read as a class and in groups a post about Internet use from the editors of *The China Beat* blog. Students will work together to summarize the information and then share this with the class to develop aspects of comparison. To summarize the information, we will use a strategy called GIST where we will summarize a passage in 15 words or less to get the main idea. This will help us better understand the article and will let you include this information the final writing assignment.

Digital China: Ten Things Worth Knowing About the Chinese Internet
By Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Kate Merkel-Hess

Thanks largely to the Olympics, 2008 will go down in history as a turning point year for China -- or, rather, one when the country passed several milestones. It'll be remembered as a turning point year in Chinese sports history, due to the country getting its first chance to host the Games, and the history of Beijing's redevelopment, due to all of that has been torn down and built up to ready the city to play host. 2008 will go down as a turning point year in the history of cross-strait relations as well, thanks to [the resumption today, after over half-a-century, of regularly scheduled Taiwan-mainland flights](#). Here, though, we focus on still another thing that 2008 is likely to be remembered as: a turning point year for the Chinese Internet.

Consider how many Internet-related developments have already taken place. In January, [YouTube videos](#) helped publicize Shanghai [protests against extensions of a high-speed train line](#). In February, China replaced America as [the country with the most Internet users](#). In March and April, bloggers and hackers made headlines, as the furor over the Tibet riots and the roughing up of a Chinese torchbearer in Paris played out in cyberspace as well [as on the ground](#). In May, Wen Jiabao became [China's first leader with a Facebook page](#). In June, Hu Jintao became China's [first leader to respond to questions online](#).

And throughout 2008, news and views about the Olympics have shown up on the Chinese Internet, thanks to everything from [the official Beijing Games website](#) that features non-stop promotion of and updates about the event, to a flurry of unofficial postings, such as ones by angry netizens who complained right after the May earthquake government television was still showing [triumphant images of the torch relay](#) when the time had come to focus on the suffering of the people of Sichuan.

By now, in the wake of these and other digital events, news-savvy Americans all know the Internet has become an important force in Chinese life -- but not necessarily what kind of force. Here are ten things to keep in mind whenever the Chinese Internet makes headlines.

1. *Optimists have long forecast -- inaccurately -- that the Internet will swiftly transform China into a completely open society.*

Among others, George Will, Thomas Friedman, and Bill Clinton all predicted around the millennium's turn that [the](#)

[arrival of the Internet would inevitably and swiftly set China free](#). This hasn't happened. China's still run by a Communist Party that takes harsh measures against organizations that threaten its hold on power.

2. *Pessimists continue to suggest -- also inaccurately -- that Chinese political life hasn't really changed and cannot be said to have changed until the Communist Party falls. This ignores shifts in which the Internet has figured centrally.* China's leaders may not have to stand for re-election and certainly limit some forms of dissent, but the Chinese public sphere has become a more freewheeling, interesting and chaotic arena for expressions of opinion than it was. This isn't all due to the Internet (crusading print journalists and activists have also done their part), but bloggers calling attention to official corruption or mocking government policies have definitely helped alter the political landscape. It's misleading to suggest -- as the *New Republic* does in its latest special issue, "[Meet the New China \(Same as the Old One\)](#)" --that the realm of Chinese politics has remained static.

3. *It's misleading to imagine that the only Chinese Internet activity that matters politically involves "dissidents" and collective acts of protest.*

Often, the politically significant things happening online involve forms of communication, such as efforts to call attention to [corrupt acts by local officials](#), that dovetail with policies that are promoted or at least given lip service by the central authorities. In many cases, these take the form of satirical discussions, which only gradually move toward anything like a "dissident" position. A recent illustration involved reports that pigs raised to be eaten by Olympic competitors are fed a special organic diet to ensure that pork-consuming athletes won't get so full of chemicals they'll fail drug tests. This led to a flurry of Internet postings about the health risks ordinary Chinese face when eating "normal" pigs. First one and then scores of bloggers connected the dots between the regime's attentiveness to the well being of athletes and seeming lack of concern for other groups, [like miners](#). (There are scores of coal mining accidents each year, only some of which are officially acknowledged.) Many corners of the Chinese blogosphere were suddenly plastered with variations on the line: "I'd rather be an Olympic pig than a man in a coal mine!"

4. *The political uses of the Chinese Internet that draw attention here and in China often differ.*

Take, for example, Zeng Jingyan, [wife of AIDS activist Hu Jia](#). After blogging about her experiences trying to free Hu from detention, she and her husband made Time's list of the 100 most influential people. But her actions haven't gained the kind of traction in her own country as, say, the Olympic pig stories did.

5. *A lot of what happens on the Chinese Internet isn't political.*

Increasingly, Chinese Internet usage reflects the broad range of online activities happening in the US, Europe, Japan, and other wired countries. Most Chinese Internet cafes are packed with students playing online video games, not checking out political websites. Online chat rooms are packed. Online commerce is growing rapidly. Online stock trading has taken off. And after the Sichuan earthquake, Chinese donated millions of dollars online.

6. *Though the Internet is thought of as an "international space," postings on it can be intensely patriotic, even jingoistic (in China and elsewhere).*

Early Internet pioneers opined that the Internet would increasingly make national boundaries and identities irrelevant, especially among the wired young. But Chinese netizens can be nationalistic as well as cosmopolitan. In the spring, after the Tibet and Paris incident, for example, fenqing ("angry youths") [took to the net](#), creating YouTube videos and blog posts that denigrated Tibetan rioters and railed against the French.

7. *Self-styled patriotic postings can make the government uneasy.*

Unrestrained nationalism has often been a problem for the Chinese government. So officials are understandably wary when young people start to toss about nationalist slogans on the Internet and sometimes act quickly to rein things in. For instance, in April 2005, when anti-Japanese protests broke out across China in response to debates over the content of Japanese history textbooks ([and their portrayal of World War II events](#)), internet censors quickly added the word "demonstration" to their list of banned words at QQ, China's most popular internet messaging service. This spring, the government initially allowed anti-French sentiment to build, but soon was moving to tamp it down as online activists began calling for boycotts of international companies whose investment money Beijing has courted.

8. *Censorship is more complex than just "Big Brother" blocking sites or the "Great Firewall of China" keeping things out.*

While Chinese Internet censorship is widespread, it's not a single unified system. There is some meta-level screening of taboo words and images (like the Dalai Lama's name and face), but the "firewall" is actually a series of blocks -- some at the national level, some at the local level. Universities, schools, and companies monitor and screen Internet traffic, as do Internet service providers and even individual websites. At the Chinese [news blog Danwei](#), they've coined the catchy phrase "Net Nanny" to better reflect the Chinese government efforts to prevent its citizens from being exposed to [the wrong kinds of things](#). Some observers, like Rebecca MacKinnon, have noted the playful language games netizens use to circumvent the filters, but other discussions simply never take place, due not just to ham-handed interference but also self-censorship.

9. *China isn't always just following trends when it comes to Internet usage, as it sometimes set them.*

This is true of software and technology developments for Internet censorship. It's also true of some creative areas. For instance, before the final installment of Harry Potter's adventures hit bookshelves last year, Chinese fans were able to read multiple versions online -- written by Chinese authors [riffing on J.K. Rowling's popular series](#) -- as well as several [unauthorized translations of the real deal](#). Another example is that books made up of posting from [popular blogs began making regular appearances on Chinese bestseller lists](#) back in 2006 when these were still very rarely published in the West.

10. *You don't have to read Chinese to know what Chinese bloggers are saying.*

You can go to "Blog for China," a site started by a group of American-based Chinese students during the recent firestorm over alleged Western bias in media coverage of China, Or visit sites like China Digital Times, Danwei, EastSouthWestNorth, Shanghaiist, and RConversation, all of which regularly translate posts from and track development relating to the Chinese Internet. We depend heavily on them in our work for ["The China Beat: Blogging How the East is Read"](#) a site launched by academics and freelance writers interested in Chinese affairs. And as anyone who has gone to the links we've provided above will know by now, we've relied upon them in creating this top ten list on the challenging, important topic of making sense of an increasingly wired and ever-changing China.

For the first item on the list, summarize the paragraph in 15 words or less as whole class. Then, with the remaining passages break into groups with each group reading and summarizing a passage. Finally, each group will report out the main idea of their excerpt.

1.

2.

- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Visit the Internet Live Stats website:

<http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>

How does internet use compare and contrast in China and the US?

Now, we will use the information you have learned to develop a comparison about how people in China use the internet compared to Americans. Use the article from *China Beat* and your own knowledge about Internet use to fill in the chart below. You can list both similarities and differences. Remember that we are trying to answer the question: How much has the Internet increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States?

INTERNET USAGE: COMPARING CHINA AND THE US

Point of comparison	China	United States
Use of internet		
Role of blogs		
Who uses the internet?		

<p>What things do people do online?</p> <p>What types of things attract attention on the internet?</p> <p>How are people political on the Internet?</p> <p>How do people organize themselves into groups via their Internet use?</p> <p>How is the Internet international?</p> <p>How does the government control or influence the Internet?</p>		
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Part 3: Blogging a response

You have read about bloggers and you may already be one. This part of the lesson will allow you to develop a blog response to the question we have been considering: How much has the Internet

increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States? You will use the information you have learned in the previous lessons to help you develop an informed response.

Let's start with your ideas. Record your initial thoughts to the answer below. Don't forget to consider several things: How is the Internet used in China and the US? How do people use the Internet to exchange information? What types of information have been exchanged? How has the Internet changed people's relationship to their government? How has the Internet changed people's relationships to others in their local, national, and international communities?

Organize your ideas into 2 main ideas that respond to the question. List the ideas and examples.

topic 1

evidence:

analysis:

topic 2

evidence:

analysis:

With these ideas and evidence you should have enough information to answer the question: How much has the Internet increased citizen participation and expanded civic society in China and the United States?

Your answer is your thesis, write it here:

Now you should consider the counter argument. This should include two parts: the counter argument and your response. First, you imagine a reader who may question your ideas. Then, develop a position that differs from your thesis or point, such as an alternative explanation or proposal that makes more sense. You can introduce the counter argument with statements like: *One might object here that...* or *It might seem that...* or *It's true that...* or *Admittedly,...* or *Of course,...* Then, you return to your own argument—which you announce with a *but, yet, however, nevertheless or still*—you can refute the counter argument by presenting new evidence or restating your thesis in a way that is more nuanced as a result of the counter argument.

Once you have these components, you are ready to write for the blog.