

Coffee, Controversy and Connectivity:
**Why Coffee Houses Concern
Governments**



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Global news organization, CNN, recently published an article on “Internet addiction” in China, where use of the web is growing at a phenomenal rate. In China, Internet addiction is classified as a mental illness and some of the statistics are startling to other cultures in which Internet connectivity is encouraged – viewed as a positive means of engaging others on a global scale.

Not so in China:

China has more than 400 private rehab clinics dedicated to Internet addiction.

The country claims there are 10 million web addicts, mostly teen-agers.

None of these Internet “re-education” centers is legally sanctioned by the Chinese government.

A 14-year old boy was nearly beaten to death and hospitalized after the brutal treatment received at the hands of other rehab facility members.

Medical professionals in China have called for laws and regulations to govern treatment of Internet addiction, though these regulations are still not in place.

Tao Ran, Director of China's first Internet Addiction clinic, located at Beijing's Military Hospital, stated that, “Internet addiction is treatable. Through three months treatment, 80% of the patients can get away from the addiction.”

In China, according to Tao, some youths are so immersed in web-based activity, “They suffer depression, nervousness, fear and unwillingness to interact with others, panic and agitation”

The result?

The Chinese government has begun a systematic campaign to (1) limit access to the web by banning social media sites and (2) close down cyber cafes where “Internet addicts” gather to share their addiction.

The outcome?

A more closed society and a government that views Internet connectivity along with engagement through web-based, social media sites as a threat.

About one-quarter of the Chinese population use the web regularly. Three-quarters are connected to the web through home-based systems. However, 42% log on at Internet cafes in major cities and in the countryside. These hot spots that enable web connectivity have become hot spots for another reason in China.

Internet café owners unscrupulously entice young teens to visit their establishments by providing preloaded porn videos along with free access to gambling sites and game sites. These activities are considered unproductive in a society in which productivity has made China a world leader in the manufacture of goods.

For this reason, use of the Internet – especially among the young in cyber cafes, is considered fun – play, not work. It's also viewed as a threat to a still-guarded government that, while encouraging self-improvement and commercial entrepreneurship, still controls what citizens read or view on the web. Many sites are simply banned.

Baidu, the Chinese version of Google in the West, limits search results according to government edict. As a result, the government in China not only controls the ability to engage others around the world, it protects itself from what government officials view as threats to the stability of the Chinese status quo.

The social sites, whether accessed from the home system or from a cyber café, point visitors to interesting blog posts, informative articles and differing opinions. Debate is a part of the social media experience in the West.



The Internet in the West

The World Wide Web (W3) is viewed quite differently in Western nations. Starbucks, a popular coffee chain, is known as an Internet hot spot. Starbucks' customers can log on to the Internet freely, keeping these customers in place drinking espresso, lattes and other coffee concoctions at sometimes shocking prices.

In addition to national chains, like Starbucks, each small town in North America and Europe has its own cyber café with names like Molten Java, The Java Joint and Beans. These web hot spots are gathering places for cyber-savvy web users. They're places in which discussions, debates and the exchange of ideas and opinions are simply part of the coffee house experience.

In fact, some of these local coffee houses hold regular meetings to discuss issues of the day (and, of course, to sell more coffee and snacks).

In Canada, the UK, the United States, Norway and other “Western” countries, access to the web is unfettered and even encouraged. The governments of these nations don’t view engagement with others as a threat. In fact, these countries encourage the exchange of opinions and ideas through the development of social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Plurk, Brightkite, MySpace and other sites on which members post their thoughts and opinions freely.

These social sites, whether accessed from the home system or from a cyber café, point visitors to interesting blog posts, informative articles and differing opinions. Debate is a part of the social media experience in the West. It’s encouraged, especially by coffee house owners who maintain hot spots for easy web connectivity. These business owners know that the longer the “web addict” stays on-line, the more espressos these cyber-surfers will order.

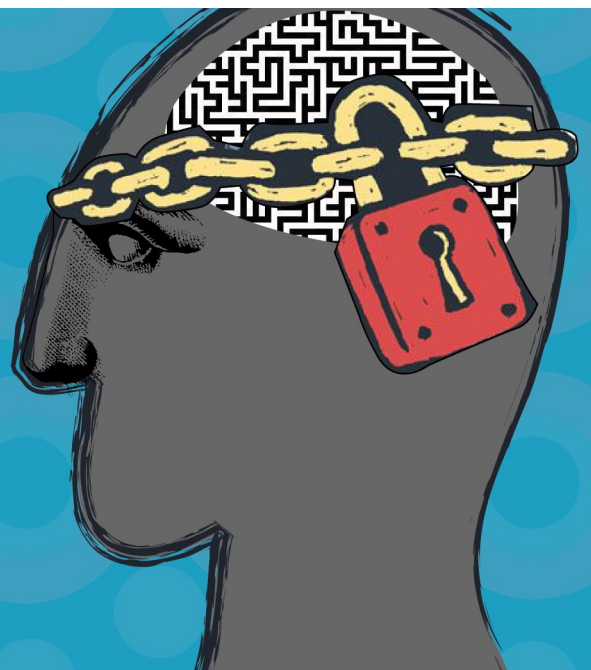
So, while China actively shuts down Internet hot spots (at some significant expense to the government, BTW, since each cyber cafe generates an average of \$150 USD monthly in tax revenues), and sends Internet addicts to “re-education” facilities where these young people are subjected to physical and emotional abuse from counselors and peers, the West encourages web access, simplifies it through the creation of coffee house hot spots providing instant Internet access that facilitates engagement with other cultures without fear.

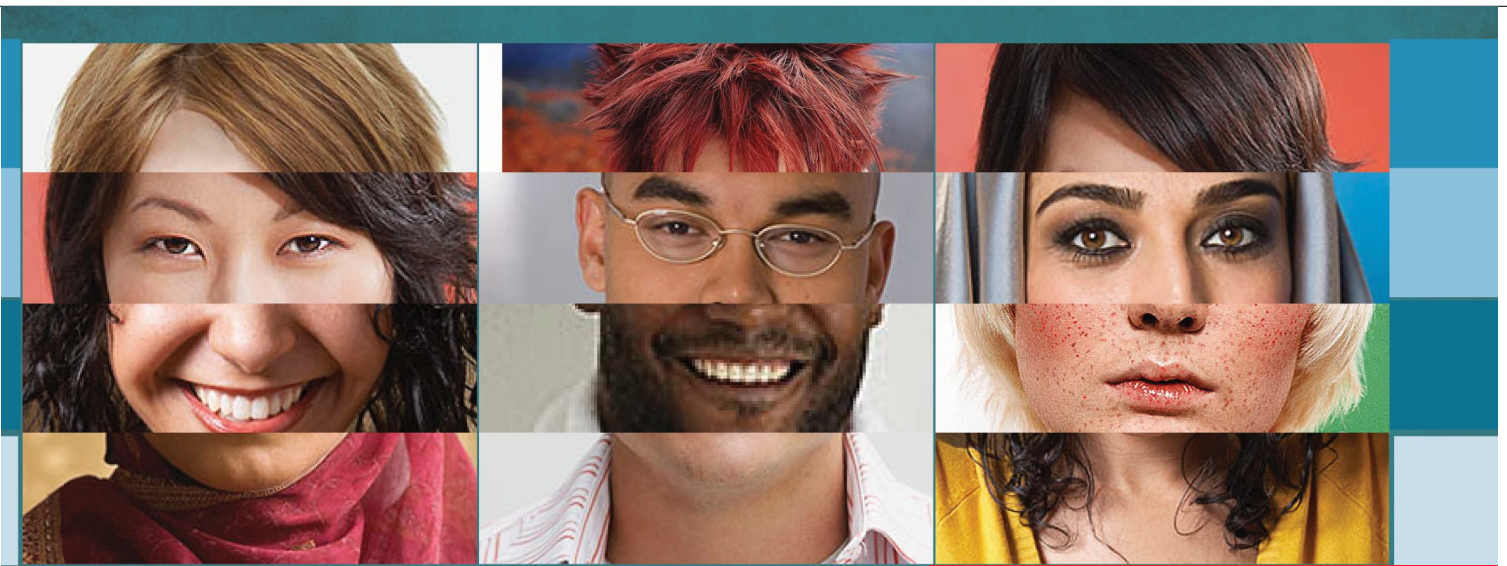
What’s the difference?

Responsible access. When it comes to the teenage audience, all public access facilities in the U.S. must comply with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), including filtered Internet access for youth under 17 years of age. Exploitive behavior is not tolerated.

China’s growing pains with the Internet harkens back to the “two steps forward, one step back policy” of earlier regimes. A lesson to be learned for other regions trying to manage an explosive growth of Internet usage among a increasingly youthful population.

When governments attempt to prohibit natural, human activity, people simply ignore laws and change the way they access these activities.





**We all learn from each other.
We all teach each other.**

The internet, coffee houses and the middle east

The issues associated with coffee house hot spots and web connectivity has an interesting history in countries of the Near and Middle East. In centuries past, some countries in the region followed strict Muslim law regarding coffee consumption, though today, coffee shops are now commonly accepted as part of the cultural fabric of these diverse societies.

In many countries, drinking coffee was once thought to run counter to Islamic law because it is an intoxicant and, thought by some, to harm the body. Today, coffee houses are common, popular gathering places in large urban centers and small, countryside villages.

Qahwa has been used throughout the Middle East for more than 500 years, starting in Yemen and spreading throughout the region. In fact, hundreds of years ago, the use of qahwa in Mecca was well known, and therefore, an accepted beverage according to strict Islamic law.

Prohibitions on the use of qahwa have never been successful. In 1544, the Ottoman Sultan banned coffee and when word spread from Damascus, **“The prohibition was observed for all of one day and then use returned to normal.”**

The simple fact is, qahwa has, for centuries, been a part of the societal fabric of the Near and Middle East, and coffee houses have been popular gathering places, demonstrating that people will engage in activities they enjoy despite government and religious edicts. The fact that coffee houses in this region have flourished for centuries indicates that prohibitions have never been an effective means of controlling human activity.

When governments attempt to prohibit natural, human activity, people simply ignore laws and change the way they access these activities.

Positive outcomes through cyber cafe hot spots

The Chinese government's policy of closing down cyber cafes and limiting access to the web won't deliver the positive outcomes government officials hope for:

Banning Internet hot spots simply won't solve what the government views as a problem. History provides evidence that banning substances isn't effective. One of the biggest controversies in the Islamic world from the 16th to the 18th century was the spread of coffee and coffee houses. To many Muslims and their religious leaders, coffee was considered a drug, its consumption a violation of Islamic law. Further, in the Middle East, coffee was rejected simply because it was an innovation - the Islamic concept of bid'a.

The simple fact is this: A government is powerless to legislate social behavior. People will break laws to do the things that are important to them. People will engage in the activities they enjoy regardless of what laws are enacted by governments.

The world has seen the power on the Internet, yet this technology is still in its infancy. We can only imagine the benefits the W3 will deliver in the years ahead.



Governments seeking positive outcomes among their people must recognize the human need to engage others. We are, by our very nature, social beings. This is especially true among the younger members of a society – teens and people in their 20s reaching out to engage others from different cultures. In the Middle East, teens and people younger than 30 years of age form the majority.

These men and women are web savvy. They desire to engage others through the use of social media, where ideas can be exchanged without fear of reprisal – without fear of being labeled “mentally ill” as many Chinese teens have been labeled. This innate, human desire to reach out is most efficiently and effectively implemented through the use of the World Wide Web (W3).

Indeed, the W3 evolved in the West with the advent of on-line bulletin boards that evolved into chat rooms. In fact, Web 2.0 technology, which includes increased interactivity among businesses and individuals, is developing at breathtaking speed in the Western world.

Consider Twitter, a powerful instant messaging service. While only a few years old, a Twitter account is almost a necessity in Europe and North America. In fact, some companies and individuals have tens of thousands of followers on Twitter, which offers non-stop, real-time interaction between businesses (B2B) and consumers (B2C).

The web was fully developed when it reached the Muslim world, providing governments less time to consider the implications of instant messaging, SMS, blogs and other forms of social media. The same is true in China. The web didn't evolve. It was already a fully functioning technology, complete with powerful search engines, when it reached China's teen population.

And because the web is a low-cost form of entertainment in China (approximately 30 cents U.S. per hour), on-line social activity became a popular source of entertainment for virtually all segments of the Chinese population. However, because the web “appeared” one day, rather than evolving slowly as it did in North America and Europe, the Chinese government has yet to fully appreciate how to direct the positive benefits the world wide web offers in the arenas of commerce, education, entertainment and engagement with the rest of what is now, clearly, a global community.

Given the lessons learned in China, how should Islamic governments, and countries with large Muslim populations, react to this technology? First, recognize that the World Wide Web is a reality that isn't going to disappear. The genie is out of the bottle and there's no way to put it back in. ►

Recognize the benefits of engagement, especially among the young members of any society. The World Wide Web offers the opportunity to learn AND to teach. When we, as a people, engage other cultures we create greater understanding of views that differ from our own.

The only way to predict The future is to create it

Currently, there is an opportunity for governments, religious leaders, businesses, media and influential individuals to encourage the use of Internet cafes and provide access to the World Wide Web as an uncensored, open portal that leads to real engagement with others in the same sphere.

The World Wide Web isn't a passing fad that will vanish in a few months. It's an invaluable tool that greatly improves productivity within countries and individuals.

The ability to collaborate on line, for example, is an obviously valuable educational tool.

Distance learning, through sites like Moodle.com, brings the university classroom to the student in a remote village, educating the population conveniently, inexpensively and interactively.

On-line seminars provide learning opportunities on industry-specific topics. Further, these "webinars" encourage the exchange of ideas to the benefit of all digital attendees.

Client relations management (CRM) software equips even the smallest start-up business in a remote location to track orders and keep in touch with an expanding client base.

Web connectivity breeds understanding between people on a global scale. This is obviously a desirable outcome of unfettered access to the Internet.

Internet engagement with others leads to the development of synergies and the development of new concepts, new ideas, new products and improved relations at the national, regional and individual levels.

Internet connectivity hastens the development of underdeveloped economies or economies seeking to grow more quickly within the global marketplace.

An uncensored, world wide web provides a level playing field for all. All are welcome; all are encouraged to contribute to the technology and to the information base that grows daily.

We all learn from each other. We all teach each other.

We all become better people through engagement with other schools of thought, other religious beliefs, other governments, other businesses, other cultures and new friends.

The Roles of Government in Creating Web Access Governments, religions, media and cultures offer the most convenient, in-place tools for creating an atmosphere of engagement within the global community. These institutions affect laws, attitudes of citizens and corporate culture within the economy. Thus, government, religious institutions, schools and universities and traditional media are the tools that will have the greatest impact on web accessibility, whether in China, the U.S., the Middle East, or South Asia.

What actionable steps should these institutions undertake? These institutions are the leaders in the web-accessibility movement and, as such, wield the greatest influence on web usage among businesses and all segments of the society, from young children to our respected senior population.

The Roles of Government in Creating Web Access Governments, religions, media and cultures offer the most convenient, in-place tools for creating an atmosphere of engagement within the global community.





**The role of government?
To facilitate the process of engagement
with other global citizens
around the world.**

The key steps to the future are clearly laid out before us if our institutions simply lead the way:

- 1.** Provide the infrastructure required to access others across the globe
- 2.** Provide the education to web users and potential web users to use the technology more effectively and without fear or stigma
- 3.** Encourage web-based interactivity, don't stifle it
- 4.** Recognize the value of engagement across the complete spectrum of any national society
- 5.** Eliminate bans on social media sites; these web sites tend to regulate themselves
- 6.** Encourage web access through a more robust network of hot spots like cyber cafes and learning centers
- 7.** Establish these facilities within public gathering places such as mosques to provide the social context for learning, commerce, and discovery
- 8.** Integrate distance learning into current school curriculae to encourage the exchange of ideas
- 9.** Eliminate any social stigma associated with web use through advocacy marketing
- 10.** Legislate and enforce the proper Internet protection guidelines for the youth of the nation

There is nothing to fear from engagement through the World Wide Web. It is as natural as shaking hands, bowing and smiling at a new face half-way across the globe. This digital connectivity will continue to grow in spite of rehab camps for Internet addicts in China, in spite of government "filtering" of emails in the United States, in spite of a low level of technological expertise – even in spite of the lack of electricity. Hand-cranked computers that turn physical energy into electrical energy already exist.

The world has seen the power on the Internet, yet this technology is still in its infancy. We can only imagine the benefits the W3 will deliver in the years ahead.

However, we can be sure of one thing: those countries that attempt to digitally isolate themselves through banning of web activity will fail. These nations will be left behind as the world grows more productive, more connected and more understanding of other value systems.

Now is the time to embrace this technology and to accelerate its use, especially among the young. These young people, after all, will write the future.

And the future is here today.



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