

Koolhaas & Google in China

On the Perversion of Censorship

Jorinde Seijdel

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Rem Koolhaas and Google are doing business in China – along with countless others, of course. But the new promised land is still a dictatorship in which the Communist Party exercises censorship on a large scale. Both Koolhaas and Google appear to be supporting and facilitating that censorship with their own particular projects. Censorship, it would seem, is no longer a categorical evil in the post-modern culture, but an integral force.

A familiar premise of Western culture is that the public media exist to help uphold democracy and to guarantee its openness. Sabotaging these media is considered a form of censorship. Censorship, in the sense of denial of information, is thus held to be a pre-eminent threat to the political or moral order. It is hardly surprising, in this light, that Rem Koolhaas's acceptance of a commission to design the new headquarters in Beijing for the Chinese state television company CCTV, while widely applauded, meets resistance from some quarters. ¹ No less surprising is that Google's decision to launch a censored version of its search engine, Google.cn, is seen not only as an understandable business move but as an issue for debate. ²

From what we may term a modernist critical viewpoint, Koolhaas and Google are both candidates for a 'department of lies' under whose aegis hot topics such as the Dalai Lama, Taiwan's aspirations for independence, the 1989 events on Tiananmen Square, the Falun Gong movement and Chinese human rights violations are not to be mentioned. From the same viewpoint, it is striking that Amnesty International reported as follows in early 2006, thirty years after the death of Mao: 'The human rights situation in China has deteriorated sharply over the last decade. Violations are widespread: torture and mistreatment by police and prison guards; arbitrary detention; biased courts; far-reaching restrictions on freedom of speech in all forms, especially with regard to dissidents and to religious or spiritual movements; the heavy repression of nationalistic activities and sympathies in the Tibet and Xinjiang regions. Executions take place on a wide scale, often consequence to arbitrary proceedings and/or political interference.' ³

The Google Feeling

At the same time, however, people in cultural and commercial circles tend to gloss over or simply ignore criticisms such as these. The country whose new motto is 'To Get Rich is Glorious' acts as a beacon of economic development, and has so become irresistible to Western investors and consumers who cheerfully and post-critically see prosperity as an inextricably interwoven with freedom – an extremely rash connection to make, according to specialist commentators. The fact that everyone is getting involved in China, at least in business respects, is often posed as a counterargument to criticisms of Koolhaas and Google. But isn't that plain cynicism?

Those who are involved have other arguments, too. Google, whose slogan is 'Don't Be Evil',

claims its decision to venture into China (admittedly on a path already beaten by Yahoo!, Microsoft and Cisco) was motivated by the thought that it would be even worse for the country if people lacked the facility of Googling. Google wouldn't really be deceiving the Chinese public anyway, because Google.cn would inform users with a message whenever a search action was blocked. What is more, according to Google, this would in itself have a gently subversive effect and encourage Chinese users to risk infiltrating through the Great Chinese Firewall, the nickname for the software which filters international web traffic into China and which has been designated by some as 'the most sophisticated effort of its kind in the world'. As the BBC observed, 'China is proof that the Net can be developed and strangled all at once.'⁴

However you look at it, Google is trying to conceal its pure market-mindedness. But what also becomes painfully clear is that people outside China, too, have surrendered en masse to a business venture which manages a lot of the wayfinding on the Internet, and which is prepared to perform censorship for commercial motives if necessary – motives which are not immediately obvious to everyone. Is this the 'Google Feeling'?⁵

The Koolhaas Feeling

Architects often characterize China today as the world's biggest building site.⁶ The Olympic Games are programmed for Beijing 2008, and much work still has to be completed; first of all, the Olympic Stadium designed by Herzog and De Meuron, and of course Koolhaas's CCTV Building. In an interview on the Dutch TV channel VPRO in 2004, Koolhaas stated: '[Our participation] is based on the estimation that forces are presently active in China who are going to develop Chinese politics in a certain direction that I can sympathize with and support. Firstly, there is a privatization process going on. They want to turn the state-run television authority into a kind of BBC. Secondly, I think that the influence of the digital revolution will eventually turn into a medium of liberation and information equality, particularly in China... If I had any doubts about it, I wouldn't do it. I'm convinced. And it wasn't a snap decision: I have been in China many times since as long ago as 1995, and I have observed and analysed which way things are heading... But I fully recognize that it's an estimate, for sure. I admit that there's a moral issue. And I also admit that we could be making a mistake... And I would find that disastrous – with regard to myself, too.'⁷

Now, in 2006, access to BBC Chinese.com is still being blocked in China, and it seems extremely unlikely that the Communist Party's repressive control will be any less rigorous a year from now. We may well wonder what kind of conclusions Koolhaas will draw if his estimate or feeling is not borne out. Koolhaas's involvement in China is no doubt sincere, but in which China? The China which, according to Amnesty, is presently holding at least 64 cyber-dissidents in captivity? That is the Chinese digital revolution.

Still, it is interesting that defenders of Koolhaas, like those of Google, argue that the design of the medium – in this case, the CCTV Building – may well have a beneficial effect when built. 'The character of the building can have a positive effect on the surroundings. It isn't a hermetically sealed box but is partly open to the public. Besides housing the state television corporation, it contains a media park, a hotel and other public amenities.'⁸ A heartening modernist-utopian outlook, isn't it?

The Censorship Feeling

Before this essay risks descending into old-fashioned critical or moralizing evaluation, we must reconsider the question of why Koolhaas and Google are able to do what they are doing in China without losing a substantial amount of credibility in the West. Aren't their censorship-supporting activities the outcome of a changing attitude in Western societies toward censorship in general? Many social and political events or trends of recent times do indeed seem to suggest that the dictate of visibility and openness, in which censorship is taboo, has reached a turning point. The traditional conflict between freedom of speech and prohibition seems to be increasingly swept under the carpet.

It is the affirmative and rhetorical quality of the ongoing debates concerning visibility, openness and freedom of speech that itself betrays the increasing emptiness of these concepts. Their hidden, prohibited and secretive dimensions seem to be better at producing meaning and more eloquent about the contemporary condition of our culture than those things that are explicitly demonstrated, stated or depicted. The visible and ostensibly uncensored aspect has suffered inflation in a culture which has increasingly striven to reveal all, which has willingly surrendered its secrets and its privacy to the cameras and the internet.

New Normality

Censorship and self-censorship are becoming decisive forces, and they are doing so in an entirely new way: on a largely voluntary basis. All things considered, we surrender remarkably easily to the ascendant regime of censorship and control. Indeed, we increasingly insist on the imposition of censorship and confidentiality, on the development of watertight systems of supervision. Society raises scarcely any resistance to the increasing powers of national and international secret services and other monitoring, surveillance and archiving agencies. These agencies garner information from society, usually without it becoming clear what they do with it, in a kind of inverse censorship. In this perverted logic of censorship, leaks of information are deplored more strongly than information suppression. The fossilized mechanisms of democracy inform us, usually perfunctorily, that they are keeping something secret, as hollow signs of a public sphere that no longer exists.

Our society's increasing obsession with national and personal security and with public order violates more and more taboos. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers, for example, to a new 'normality' of the relationship between citizens and the state which has developed as a reaction to the recent security policies of the Bush administration, and in which anyone wishing to venture onto US territory must be prepared to have fingerprints or iris scans taken. Surveillance practices, which have always been rightly regarded as inhuman and exceptional, are increasingly accepted as humane, normal dimensions of life, writes Agamben, who thus holds that the politico-legal status of democratic citizens is changing and that the room for political action is shrinking. 'What is at stake here is nothing less than the new "normal" bio-political relationship between citizens and the state. This relation no longer has anything to do with free and active participation in the public sphere, but concerns the enrolment and the filing away of the most private and incommunicable aspect of subjectivity: I mean the body's biological life. These technological devices that register and identify naked life correspond to the media devices that control and manipulate public speech: between these two extremes of a body without words and words without a body, the space we once upon a time called politics is ever more scaled-down and tiny.'⁹

Allocation of Power

Censorship is no longer necessarily a categorical evil in post-modern culture, but an integral, amoral force of security societies. This perversion of censorship is not really all that new, but it has reached a new plane. As Michel Foucault observed, in his analyses of power, many expressions of our society are tolerated repressively, sapping them of their transgressive potential. He also holds that 'the Author' is a product of censorship. He regards the author figure as a kind of artificial construction for regulating the discourse of a community. Texts, books and discourses do not actually gain authors until the moment they are subjected to censorship. ¹⁰

Returning to Koolhaas and Google in China, we may wonder whether Koolhaas is being accorded the status of Mega-Author by grace of the Chinese authorities, or, on the contrary, that in designing the CCTV Building he is relinquishing his authorship in a grandiloquent gesture. And is Google upgrading the state of China to Author status, or vice versa? Koolhaas and Google, like true avant-gardists, both embrace (from a post-modernist standpoint, too, but then without having to accept what used to be the unavoidable consequences) the new paradigm of censorship, and so enter into a power swap.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Footnotes

1. For the design and a description of the CCTV-building, see the OMA website: www.oma.nl. Ian Buruma on 30 July 2002 in The Guardian: 'Unless one takes the view that all business with China is evil, there is nothing reprehensible about building an opera house in Beijing, or indeed a hotel, a hospital, a university or even a corporate headquarters. But state television is something else. CCTV is the voice of the party, the centre of state propaganda, the organ which tells a billion people what to think.' Architecture critic Hans Ibelings compares Koolhaas and Herzog & De Meuron, who designed the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, with Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Ricardo Bofill, who accepted the Iraqi Ministry of Culture's invitation in 1982 to enter the closed competition for the State Mosque of Baghdad. 'Iraq had already been at war with Iran for two years. Nevertheless, these architects knowingly did Saddam's dirty work, helping him acquire the pro-Western image he desired at the time,' according to Ibelings.
<http://www.bouwenwonen.net/architectuur/read.asp?id=5878>. See also the VPRO programme RAM, episode 20 of 29-02-2004, with an extensive piece on Koolhaas and the CCTV Building, which can again be viewed on the VPRO website, in which Koolhaas gives his opinion, as well as his proponents (Wouter van Stiphout, Aaron Betsky) and adversaries (Bernard Hulsman). www.vpro.nl
2. See, for instance: googleblog.blogspot.com www.nrc.nl news.bbc.co.uk www.indymedia.org.uk
3. www.amnesty.nl, consulted on 20-02-2006.
4. BBC News on the Internet on 06-01-2006. news.bbc.co.uk
5. In *Dark Fiber*, media theoretician Geert Lovink convincingly states that the original values of Internet, including freedom of speech, are not so much threatened by government as by commerce. *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2002).
6. See Hans Ibelings' statement in note 1.
7. See the reference to the VPRO programme RAM in note 1.
8. A statement by Harm Tilman, editor-in-chief of de Architect, published on the website of the VPRO programme RAM, episode 20, 29-02-2004.
<http://www.vpro.nl/programma/ram/afleveringen/16450074/items/16635095/>.
9. In an article published on the opinion pages of Le Monde, 10-01-2004. See also: http://www.biopolitiek.nl/art_bd_giorgio.html.
10. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in: Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford, Basis Blackwell, 1977), 113-139.

Tags

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