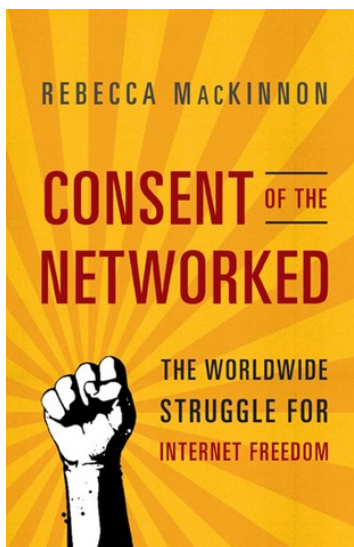


September 20, 2015 **Book review: Consent of the Networked | INFO 200**
Posted by Anastasia Finch under [Fall 2015](#) | Tags: [book review](#), [info 200](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)

I wanted to read Rebecca MacKinnon's *Consent of the Networked* (2012) because I am very interested in internet history, and particularly in how governments regulate citizens' access to the internet via internet service providers (ISPs). I hoped that *Consent of the Networked* would give me more insight into the thought processes behind government internet censorship and what people are doing in response to it. I did indeed learn about that, but I also learned about internet activists around the world, how people are challenging government censorship, and way more about China than I originally expected.

Why the focus on China? Well, MacKinnon was a journalist there for many years and has maintained an interest in the country even after moving away. Also, and probably more importantly, China has the Great Firewall of China, a massive, government-run internet censorship program. It's a good place to focus on for a book about government censorship and internet freedom.



MacKinnon doesn't really get into *why* China has such a huge firewall, instead focusing more on what it means for for both Chinese citizens and people outside of China, and their access to information. The firewall actually works both ways: it not only blocks out incoming information that the government doesn't like, but it can block information coming from inside the country, too.

This leads to the part I found the most fascinating: there are Chinese blogger activists who circumvent the firewall, form groups centered around technology and the internet, and do their best to give a voice to people who the government tries to silence. *Consent's* viewpoint is that technology/the internet is a good thing that betters the lives of those who interact with it, and that overzealous government regulation, consumer apathy, and greedy Internet Service Providers (ISPs) stifle consumer access to information, lessens connectedness, and slows down innovation. Internet activists work to free information from all of that.

According to *Consent*, the biggest problem facing modern netizens today is not necessarily government censorship (though of course it is still a problem). Instead, people don't understand or care why they should be involved and informed in decisions regarding internet rights. They also don't know or understand the relationship between government and ISP companies, or why they should care if ISPs hand over customer information because the government (illegally) requests it. As MacKinnon (2012) says, "If our communications and access to information are manipulated in ways we are not aware of, and if these companies' relationships with government are opaque, our ability to understand how power is being exercised over us, and our ability to hold that power to account, will be eroded in a more subtle and insidious manner than Orwell ever imagined." (pp. 32)

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Big brother is watching you... (source)

There is hope, however! Not every netizen is clueless or apathetic, as seen from the many internet activists and advocate groups highlighted in the book. These internet activist groups are an information community, and they match particularly well with Fisher and Durrance's (2003) five characteristics of information communities:

1. **Exploit technology (aka the internet).** Most, if not all, internet groups are actually based *on* the internet. They also use email, forums, blogs, social media, etc. to connect with one another.
2. **Emphasize collaboration between diverse groups.** Internet advocates come from all social backgrounds, countries, age groups and genders. Their main defining characteristic is an interest in technological freedom.
3. **Form around people's need for information in ways people see as helpful.** An example of this is Creative Commons, a nonprofit that, according to MacKinnon (2012), is a "flexible system of copyright licenses enables organizations like Global Voices, Wikipedia, and many other nonprofit citizen projects to ensure that their content is shared as widely as possible and translated into as many languages as possible, with the creators' full approval and consent" (pp. 310).
4. **Remove barriers to information.** Internet advocates, or at least the ones highlighted in *Consent of the Networked*, are universally against censorship and government regulation of ISPs.
5. **Foster social connectedness within larger community.** Internet advocates do a lot of outreach towards people not necessarily in the "know." The Electronic Frontier Foundation, for example, runs campaigns to inform people of threats to their digital freedoms.

On the whole, *Consent of the Networked* is a very good introduction to internet advocate/activist communities, as well as explaining clearly and precisely what governments of different countries are doing to try and control access to the internet and how they are connected to ISPs and the people who use them. I enjoyed reading it!

References

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