

Information Sovereignty Reviewed

Wenxiang Gong
Peking University

The term *information sovereignty* does not sound unfamiliar to many of us. Visitors going through the Chinese Customs would be asked to fill out a “Customs Declaration Form”, and Article Three of the form is a list of forbidden items: printed matters, films, photos, records, movies, audio-tapes, video-tapes, VCD, DVD, and other computer storage medium that are harmful to Chinese politics, economy, culture and morality”. The customs officer can stop you or even punish you whenever he thinks you have violated the above regulation. Why does he have such powers? Because he is representing the Chinese government to execute its *information sovereignty*.

I. Information Sovereignty: the Concept and the Debate

Since the concept of information sovereignty was proposed decades ago, it has been one of the most controversial but unavoidable problems in the field of international relations. In the past 50 years or so, the debate over information sovereignty has gone through a pattern of “rising–intensifying–declining”. Recently, however, the discussion on information sovereignty seems to be reviving among scholars, especially Chinese scholars in the field of international relations and international communication studies. This is due to the global development in the new century, and to China’s rise and its changing role in the world.

Just by reviewing the titles of recent essays in the related fields, one can easily find quite a few newly coined terms reflecting popular ideas and opinions: *communication sovereignty*, *communication safety*, *information hegemony*, *information safety*, *information border*, *information suzerain*, *cultural sovereignty*, and *media hegemony*, etc.¹ These terms revealed growing concerns about negative consequences caused by the flourishing Chinese media market and the political and cultural influences through information diffused from out of the borders in the tide of the globalization of the world media industry. In an effort to quest for theoretical interpretation and guidance, we regard it necessary to re-examine one of the key concepts: *information sovereignty*.

What is Information Sovereignty?

The term certainly comes from the concept “sovereignty” and “sovereign state” in political science and international relations studies.

The customary meaning of sovereignty is “*superanus*” in Latin, and “*souverainete*” in French-- supreme power. According to encyclopedia definitions, sovereignty refers both to

¹ These are terms that appeared in titles of the articles published in recent 5 years in Chinese academic journals. A typical sample of these essays was written by XIE Xiaojuan: “Reflections on cultural security and cultural sovereignty”. *Vanguard Theories*. Vol. 1, 2003.

“the supreme powers exercised by a state over its own members”, and “the powers exercised by an autonomous state in relation to other countries”.²

Sovereignty therefore has two meanings: First, the highest power within the state, including that of selecting its own political, economic and social systems. Secondly, full independence and freedom from all external control.

The definition of information sovereignty: That part of the state sovereignty that is related to information.

Internally, if state sovereignty is "the ultimate authority in the decision-making process of the state and in the maintenance of order",³ then information sovereignty should be the highest power of information policy-making, and the authority to maintain information order within the state.

Externally, the Information Sovereignty refers to full legal equality with other states and the freedom from any external control with regard to the independent rights to the production and use of information.

Definition is only a Concept: Now let's look at the Reality.

In 1957 the Russians launched *Sputnik*, the first man-made satellite. Instead of turning us outward toward the space, the satellite era turned the globe inward upon itself. The real meaning of *Sputnik*, as John Naisbitt puts it, is not that it began the "Space Age", but that it marked the "globalization of the information revolution" (Naisbitt, 1982, p. 12).

It is said that the Soviet scholars first suggested the application of man-made satellite to international communication. "With the help of a large *Sputnik*, Moscow television programs could easily be relayed not alone to any point in the Soviet Union, but also far beyond its borders" (Nordenstreng & Schiller, 1979, p. 129).

Worries were caused by the fact that satellites can be used to broadcast directly to home receivers in foreign countries. If information like mass media programs comes directly to the country, how can the state exercise its "supreme power" upon the flow of information within the territory?

The widely publicized debate from mid-1960's to 1970's at United Nations centered on the question of Information Sovereignty. The rights stated in our definition of that concept were endangered. "The concern about the integrity of national sovereignty emerged with the aggressive proliferation of Western technology and with the cultural products that began in the 1950s and this integrity accelerated throughout the 1960s" (Hamelink, 1993, p. 371). Soviet propaganda should also be added to the factors that caused threat to many third world leaders.

As a temporary conclusion of the decade-long dispute, on November 15, 1972, UNESCO adopted a "*Declaration of Guiding Principles on the Use of satellite Broadcasting for the Free Flow of Information, the Spread of Education and Greater Cultural Exchange*". The keynote was reiterated in sentences like: "Satellite broadcasting shall respect the sovereignty and equality of all States." (Article II), and "Each country has the right to decide on the content of the educational programs broadcast by satellite to its people." (Article VI). It was obvious that most of the third world countries claimed their rights, or sovereignty, to decide the content of programs broadcast to it from external sources.

² *Academic American Encyclopedia*. New Jersey: Arete Publishing Company, Inc. 1981.

³ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1996 edition).

Please note that the *Declaration* was adopted with a vote of 55 to 7 with 22 abstentions, and the United States was in the minority and the Soviet Union abstained (Nordenstreng & Schiller, 1979, p. 130). And later the U.S. withdrew from the UNESCO where the developing countries strongly demanded the establishment of a “new world information order”.

Over thirty years have passed and today hundreds of man-made communication satellites are flying all over the sky, sending signals round the clock to cover every corner of the globe. With the help of two most important inventions, namely the Compressed digital satellite services and the Internet, those satellites have totally changed the way human beings communicate. Although heated debates over International Information Order are not heard as often as in the 1970's, and more developing countries like China have become much stronger in terms of information technology and media industry, yet the map of imbalanced international communication has not been changed and the old problems are still there.

II. How is Information Sovereignty Challenged Today?

Is the Concept of Information Sovereignty Applicable?

While trying to apply it to practice, the concept of Information Sovereignty is often found “paradoxical” because of the four contradictory aspects: Contradiction between “Information Sovereignty” and the globalization of communication; Contradiction between “Cultural Sovereignty” and the trend of international cultural communication; Contradiction between the state control and citizen's preferences; Differences between the information super powers and developing countries on the concept of Information Sovereignty.

II.1 Contradiction between "Information Sovereignty" and the globalization of communication

In international relations, Sovereignty means freedom, namely, the right to be “free from all external control”. It is the right of the state to freely realize its will. Since freedom in human society has always been “relative” instead of “absolute”, it follows that sovereignty should be at least to some extent relative. Only when a state chooses to totally isolate itself from the outside world, can it enjoy “absolute” freedom from any external interferences. On the other hand, a state would not be able to extend its own sovereignty out of the border and force other states to obey its own sovereign will. Every state has to “sacrifice” a bit of its own sovereignty in exchange of chances to coexist with others.

The same deduction can be applied to information sovereignty, which is an “open” concept that evolves following the course of history. Or rather, information sovereignty should be viewed from an open, or dialectical perspective.

We are now in an age of globalization, and the flow of information is also globalized. Communication by means of satellite or the Internet was at the beginning meant to break through the national borders. A country has to choose between to be or not to be a member of the Internet club, and you cannot be both or neutral. In other words, once you are driving on the Information Highway, you have to abnegate some of your rights of freedom and follow the international “traffic rules”. It would be impossible for any country to design a “one-way traffic system” to selectively control all the information flowing into and out of its borders. It might be technically feasible to select and screen information, but in reality it requires a very expensive supply of man-power and resources for any administration to obtain a nearly satisfactory result. It is simple logic that after weighing the losses and gains a state usually

chooses to allow some necessary compromises in exchange of the right to stay within the global information system. In this regard, information sovereignty can be seen as a relative power.

In the context of information globalization, the above-mentioned pattern of “compromise” for rights is universal and effective. Take the use of English as an example. Language is one of the basic components of the culture of a nation, and it is an unalienable right for a nation to safeguard the dignity and integrity of its native language. It is common practice that a leader of the state insists on speaking his/her own native language, but communication would be impossible without the interpreter who translates the speech into a foreign language. It is also common for a politician to allow some foreign (English, for instance) words or sentences when communicating with a foreign partner. While interviewed by the American journalist Edgar Snow in the 1970's Mao said in English “all-round civil war”, “Great Leader”, and “law and order”, etc., trying to express his thoughts more accurately.⁴ Certain compromise in language in return for smooth communication does by no means contradict the national dignity or state sovereignty.

The use of language on Internet has been a controversial issue since the beginning. Major technical functions of the Internet are performed in English, the international language recognized by most of the nations in the world. If every country insists on using its own language on the Internet, how could the users communicate efficiently in an international context? If for instance a French professor, who most strongly opposes the “English language imperialism”, sends an email message to a Chinese who doesn't know French but speaks English (usually the case), the choice is perhaps only English. Language is merely a tool on the Internet, and to use English for cross-languages communication might be regarded as an illustration of “compromise” in exchange for rights.

With the advance of information technology and media industry since early last century, the pattern for cross-border information flow has gone through a historical change, namely the evolution from “international communication” to “global communication”. International communication with nation states as the key players and national interests as the major goal, is being gradually replaced by global communication with not just the states but also the multinational corporations etc. as the key players, and “with Internet as the technical platform, the satisfaction of consumers' 'desire' as the basic content, and cross-border as its fundamental characteristics” (B. Yang, 2003).

The MNC (multinational corporation) actually does not belong to or represent a country, just like Time-Warner, which is based in the U.S., but should not be regarded simply as an American corporation. As a super media Empire, Time-Warner has over 200 divisions in the world, including more than 1000 chain film companies out of the U.S. It is a transnational, or globalized business that has a mission of its own. The highest goal for Time-Warner, as well as for the other MNCs, is not to serve the interest of the state, but to seek for profits through meeting the needs of customers as every corporation does.

As mentioned before, Information sovereignty includes the independent right over the production and use of information free from any external interference, but the characteristic feature of global communication promoted by the MNCs is to break through the barrier of

⁴ Mao was interviewed by Edgar Snow on Dec. 18, 1970. The records were widely publicized in China through internal channels. See *Mao Zedong's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*. Central Document Press. Vol. 13. p. 163; P. 174. 1998.

national borders. In the time of information globalization, the “highest power” of the state over information is challenged at least by the MNCs, and the traditional concept of information sovereignty seems so impotent when used to explain the reality.

II.2 Contradiction between "cultural sovereignty" and the trend of international cultural communication

The above-mentioned *Declaration of Guiding Principles* states that “Cultural programs, while promoting the enrichment of all cultures, should respect the distinctive character, the value and the dignity of each, and the right of all countries and peoples to preserve their cultures as part of the common heritage of mankind.” That is to say, information sovereignty includes the so-called “cultural sovereignty”. As a Chinese scholar asserts, cultural sovereignty is “the right and ability to resist external influence, develop and preserve the culture of the nation”(H. Wang, 1994).

The concept of cultural sovereignty is the product of cultural conflicts, especially emphasized by a nation that is comparatively weak in information communication capacity against more powerful countries. The information sovereignty is so important that a third world leader warned that “a nation whose mass media are dominated from the outside is not a nation”(Nordenstreng & Schiller, 1979, p. 128).

The external “dominance” of media refers to two aspects. First, the daily operation of media itself is controlled by foreign powers; Secondly, the content of media is controlled. The problem of external manipulation of the media can be solved through political or legal means (although “invasion” of foreign media companies is usually through legitimate channels), but the control of media content is a much more complicated issue.

In a broad sense, the communication of any kind of information can be considered to be cultural. Even information of “pure” science and technology contains some element of values, life style, or ideas about management and administration, etc. Yet cultural communication usually refers to the spread of more specific items like media products such as Hollywood movies, Rock-n-Roll, MTV, radio and TV programs, CNN news, etc. Cultural communication in essence is the spread of values. It influences and even shapes the life style and ideology of the receivers. The information sovereignty should include the right to develop and consolidate the national culture and identity through domestic and international communication. The new information technology, however, has brought about a new situation.

Theoretically the Internet and other new information technology functions to break through the monopoly of information and promotes the democratization and popularization of the new pattern of human communication. The famous futurist Negroponte predicted about a decade ago that, “the monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving into an array of cottage industries”(Negroponte, 1996, p. 57). The fact now is unfortunately on the contrary: the media empires are flourishing and marching on with a more aggressive pace.

Pessimists are worried about the cultural invasion and degeneration caused by the greed of the penetrating global media business, whereas the optimists predicted that human beings are heading for an era of the “universal culture”. In spite of the different value judgments, one has to admit that the scope, width and depth of international cultural communication is now at a stage without precedent. The former director of the CCTV (China Central Television) Mr. Weiguang Yang summarized that, in the 21st century, “The multi-polarization of international politics, the globalization of economy, and the 'Internetization' of communication, all the three

trends will inevitably trigger the exchange and amalgamation of various cultures in the world”(W. Yang, 2003).

The concept of “cultural sovereignty” was a product of the Cold War time, and the positive significance is it represented the interest of those countries that were less developed in media power, and were in an inferior position in the structure of global communication. Cultural sovereignty could serve as a slogan for the developing countries to warn people against depredatory cultural invasion from the media powerful states. The weakness of cultural sovereignty is that it was born in the age of “class struggle”, hence over-emphasized conflicts and clashes of cultures. The concept represented the “information-weak” states, therefore bears an obvious defensive tendency, which would easily lead to misunderstanding, or even a qualm or phobia towards foreign cultures. The extreme result could be cultural isolationism. The Great Wall cannot block airplanes, and neither would it be possible today for any country to block foreign cultural invasion by totally sealing oneself off from the outside world. Isolationism has been proved not to be an effective or reliable policy to combat the cultural invasion of foreign “information-strong” powers. In the new age of information globalization, we need to have new ideas and novel strategies.

II.3 Contradiction between the State Control and Citizen's Preferences

The internal sovereignty, as we explained before, is the ultimate power over any individual or group within the territory. It follows that the state may use laws, regulations, censorship policies, or other coercive means to maintain its “ultimate power” in the maintenance of domestic information order. The deduction is theoretically persuasive and logical, yet the logic of reality is much more complicated than reasoning with a pen.

In the mid-1980's a Chinese professor brought with him a copy of Mario Puzo's *The God Father*. The customs official at Beijing Airport confiscated the novel for, he explained, it was “harmful to the Chinese culture and morality”. The professor argued in vain, as is often the case, but he could never change the customs official's opinion. The professor has learned a lesson, and next time under the same circumstance he would try to invent ways to “smuggle” the book without being caught. My colleagues would cite their own successful examples to prove their talent instead of guilt in dealing with the similar situations.

Confucius said: “The Three Armies can be deprived of their commanding officer, but even a common man cannot be deprived of his opinions.” (Analects, 9-26) It is impossible even for invincible conquerors to “occupy” people's mind with force. Sovereignty is guaranteed by coercive state machinery, but it would not be appropriate to treat cultural or ideological problems with arbitrary means. Even if temporary goals were achieved, the result would not last long, and the “side-effects” would perhaps be a rebellious reaction that betrays the purposes originally intended .

To exercise “cultural sovereignty” with only legal and administrative means is like to walk with just one leg. It will be as important to win the people's support. That support is gained in two ways. The first is that laws and regulations should be both reasonable and easy to execute. Vague and ambiguous laws will cause confusion and discourage citizens from supporting it. Wording like “items ... that are harmful to Chinese politics, economy, culture and morality” quoted at the beginning of this article may be too general and inexplicit, and the verdict depends only upon the subjective judgment of the customs officials. Secondly, the state should make efforts to develop its own culture and media, and to satisfy its citizens' needs for information, entertainment, etc.

A Western scholar commented that, one condition for effectiveness of foreign propaganda broadcasting is that “the recipient population does not trust its own domestic broadcasts”. The author cited Israel as an example. During the Middle East War of the 1970's, Jordan media broadcasted relatively objective news to Israel and “Israeli censorship was sufficiently severe to provide Israelis with an incentive to hear the other side.” (Nordenstreng & Scheller, 1979. p 141) It is obvious that if domestic audience is eager to search news mainly from foreign media, or Internet websites abroad, or unofficial channels sending “bamboo telegraph”, then this proved the general audience does not believe that domestic media is reporting fresh and objective news. News media that fails to provide balanced, timely and ample information would certainly be in an unfavorable position in the severe competition in the age of information globalization.

Openness characterizes the information globalization age, ordinary people enjoy much more freedom compared with the past, freedom of selecting both the media and the content. Therefore the maintenance of information sovereignty relies more on the consent and support from the citizens, whose needs and choices are more and more the decisive factor for the rise and fall of mass media.

The “Audience Orientated” pattern has also become the law of cross-border communication. In the U.S. market of late 20th century, the sale of foreign movies fell from 10% in the 1970's to less than 5% in the 1990's, because “Americans are no longer interested in non-American movies”(McChesney, 1999, p. 41). France is a country that most radically opposes the “American cultural imperialism”, yet the sale of American movies is 60% of the total. The famous media critic Robert McChesney concluded that from the perspective of political culture, commercialism appears as a 'natural' power, rather than political control by the state. (See McChesney, 1999, p. 42) The “natural power” is the strength of the market instead of the “artificial” powers of the politicians, the state, or the sovereign. Media market is like other market, and the audience should also be regarded as God.

“Content is King” has been the slogan for media giants, because it is content that brings wealth by attracting audience. Disney, Hollywood and other world-brand cultural industries are setting up branches all over the world to produce programs that are “localized” both in form and content. As we all know, this is not motivated by their internationalism, but by their aim to please the audience--the customers--for ever more profits. The competition in global communication is to some extent like that in the market, and the key point is to win the audience. The most effective strategy is to “attract” instead of to “block”.

“Commodity Effects” in communication is the supply and demand theory borrowed from economics. It assumes that information is a commodity that has value and can be conveyed from one person to the other. The value of a piece of information is sometimes determined by scarcity:

$$\text{Demand (Persons interested)} \\ \text{Information scarcity} = \text{Availability (Persons who get)}$$

The difficulty (cost) with which the information can be obtained is one of the variables. “An item of information will be judged as increasingly valuable the costlier it is to obtain.”(Smith, 1982, p. 274.) It follows that when censorship increases the difficulty for getting the message, it has at the same time increased the value of that message.

According to the psychological reactance theory proposed by Jack Brehm, people have an intrinsic desire to think and believe as they wish. If that freedom is endangered, or denied, that person would feel a psychological discomfort called “reactance”, and “reactance motivates a person to act to maintain or regain jeopardized freedom.” Similarly, “when desired information is censored, restricted, delayed, or is otherwise difficult to obtain,” people would also be motivated to regain that freedom. (Smith, 1982, pp 280-281) In the age of information globalization, when centralized control is impossible and information flow can no longer be effectively screened by borders and customs, people have more advanced weapons to fight against censors and gain their freedom, and it becomes more and more difficult to exercise the information sovereignty by means of censorship or other forms of blockade.

II.4 Differences between the Information Superpowers and Developing Countries on the Concept of Information Sovereignty

As we remember, the 1972 “*Declaration of Guiding Principles on the Use of satellite Broadcasting*” that stressed information sovereignty was adopted with a vote of 55 to 7 with 22 abstentions, and the United States was in the minority. It is natural for the United States and other information super powers to disagree with the concept of information sovereignty because the developing countries' claim is looked upon as a threat to the vested benefits the super powers already have. The opposition of opinions still exists today.

Differences on the issue of information sovereignty between the developing countries and the information-powerful states are caused, naturally, by different standpoints on the order of international politics. When the Cold War came to an end, Western scholars began to question the validity of the traditional concept of sovereignty, and “human rights transcending sovereignty”, or “sovereignty is obsolescing” became fashionable slogans. Since state sovereignty was oppugned, information sovereignty as a derived concept would certainly be challenged. However, when the information super powers are singing praise to “total freedom of international communication”, many developing countries feel their rights and even their security endangered.

Searching related articles published in recent years in China, we found the majority of them share the same viewpoint--to repudiate the “sovereignty obsolescing” theory, and to stress the importance of safeguarding information sovereignty from the perspective of state security. They argue that: “to defend cultural sovereignty concerns not only the cultural independence of a country, but also its political sovereignty and independence” (Xie, 2003). Chinese scholars quoted Joseph S. Nye, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense and famous American political scientist by using his concept of “soft power” to prove the importance of information security. The typical ratiocination is that, globalization of information has sped up “the exchange, dissemination and penetration of all kinds of thoughts, beliefs and values”, and the information super powers headed by the U.S. employ their soft power to influence information poor countries. “There will even appear 'imperialism' of the information age, and also 'information suzerain' and information colony'. The information resources, information industry, information dissemination and information security of the poor countries will be controlled by the information super powers. The information poor countries will lose their voices, and even their original culture, values and life styles will be transformed by the information rich states.”(Yu, 2001).

The developing countries view the importance of information sovereignty as an issue concerning state security. Lessons were drawn from countries like Romania under communist

rule. The crumbling of the regime started, as was believed, from importing too many Western TV dramas to replace the dull domestic programs. Yet the term “information security” was newly coined and its connotation has not been accurately defined, and is hence often confusing.

Since 1970's confrontation of opinions on international communication has existed for several decades between the developed and the developing countries. As the well-known futurist Alvin Toffler puts it: Differences in ideas are apt to lead to conflicts, and even to “provoke the worst bloodshed in the years to come” (Toffler et al., 1995, p27). Toffler's prediction may sound too sensational, but reality taught us that propaganda and controversy did not solve problems. It would perhaps be helpful if we try to change our perspectives and look for new ways out, for instance, to find out if there are possibilities for cooperation between the parties that hold different opinions.

Information Sovereignty actually can be divided into two categories: the Hard Information sovereignty and the soft Information Sovereignty. The hard sovereignty refers to the legislative power, the administrative power, and the right to equally share communication resources with other nations. The soft information sovereignty includes the actual control of the cross-border flow of political, cultural and social information, etc. It is easier to define and measure the hard Information Sovereignty. Complaints about “cultural penetration ” and “cultural domination” are mainly related to the soft Information Sovereignty.

The threat to “information security” of the information-poor countries can be summed up into two categories: The first is the so-called “cultural security”; the second is security in the sphere of information technology. Cultural security, belonging to the Soft sovereignty as discussed above, is related to areas as ideology, political system, cultural tradition, and life style, etc. These are too sophisticated and sensitive, and agreement cannot be easily reached. In the area of information industry and technology within the category of Hard Sovereignty, there exists room for collaboration.

The rapid development of information technology has brought with it the “information divide”. It is said that 20% of the world population in the developed countries are consuming 80% of the world's natural resources (Negroponte, 1996, p. 230), and similar gap is seen in information communication. Advanced states have occupied the communication resources, such as the satellite orbit and electromagnetic spectrum. The existence of the information divide is not a problem for the information underdeveloped countries, it is also a source for hidden troubles for the rich countries. Just like the case with the development of world economy, in the context of information globalization interest of all the countries are related. The third world needs to develop its information technology and industry, and the developed countries need buyers and the market as well as smooth and expedite channels for information flow across boundaries. Interests of the two parties are not necessarily always contradictory.

Many states in the world are or will be implementing the strategy of “informationization”—to modernize the information power of a state. The key infrastructure of an informationized country has connected, through the communication networks, the operation of government systems, and the major departments of electricity, transportation, energy, military affairs, etc. “This has elevated the 'information security' from a question of industrial development to the core issue concerning the political, economic, cultural and military interest of the state” (Yu, 2001). As the ancient philosopher Laozi said, “Bad fortune is what good fortune leans on. Good fortune is what bad fortune hides in.” (*Tao Teh Ching*. Chapter 58.) Information technology has brought good fortune to mankind, but it is also true that the

more advanced information technology a country possesses, the more vulnerable it is, and the more severe the damage would be.

In the course of human history, almost every major invention was first used for warfare, and information technology is no exception. Information weapons have left the laboratory for the battlefields. As was widely publicized by the media, the U.S. troops used information weaponry in both the recent Gulf Wars, and "Information warfare", or "I-War", or "Cyberwar", became familiar terms for the public. According to Dr. Ivan Goldberg's definition, "Information warfare is "the offensive and defensive use of information and information systems to deny, exploit, corrupt, or destroy, an adversary's information, information-based processes, information systems, and computer-based networks while protecting one's own. Such actions are designed to achieve advantages over military or business adversaries".⁵ The estimate by the U. S. Department of Defense shows that about 120 states in the world have the capacity for information attacks (Yu, 2001).

New technology has made communication much easier, more effective and less expensive. Information operation that had to be managed by a big team in special labs with costly equipments may possibly be handled now by just a few people at home. Media reported so many cases about private hackers invading computer networks of vital departments of a country. It could be named warfare when individual extremists of a state use Internet and high technology to attack the financial, communications, information or military networks of another state. Information Terrorism is a new form of international terrorism. This new variety of terrorism is like all the other terrorism that threatens every country, not just the richer powers. It would be beneficial for both the information rich powers and the developing countries to build up a relationship of understanding and collaboration, and fight together against their common enemy: computer crimes and information terrorism. This is probably the most sagacious way for the majority of the countries in the world to safeguard their own interest and security. The Information Frankenstein would be the common enemy of mankind.

The G-7 Conference on Information Society held in 1995 approved the NII (National Information Infrastructure) and the GII (Global Information Infrastructure) proposals. These motions aimed at global information cooperation will certainly serve the interests of the United States and other developed countries who proposed them, but it surely provided an opportunity for the developing countries, because to set up standards and regulations will be a good start anyway for international cooperation. "The GII plan will create a new environment for global communication," a Chinese scholar noted, "and promote information exchanges among countries in the world and will certainly lead to international cooperation, namely to construct the international information order in the context of Internet." This order includes, he believes, two aspects. First, to set up the "effective coordinating mechanism" for wide-range international collaboration, and secondly, to "handle the problem of the 'North-South relationship'"(Ma & Chen, 1998). In sum, the developing countries ought to keep sober-minded and know how to protect their own interests, yet the general principle is to participate instead of to blench or abstain.

⁵ Ivan K. Goldberg, M.D. a psychiatrist and clinical psycho-pharmacologist in New York City acts as the Director of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Information Warfare (IASIW). In the past Dr. Goldberg has held positions with the United States Government and Columbia University. <http://www.psycom.net/iwar.1.html>.

III. Concepts reconsidered

From the above analysis of the contradictions between the notion of information sovereignty and the reality of the contemporary world, we could conclude that old concepts or theories should be re-examined because it can no longer serve as a guidance to success.

III.1 Information Sovereignty Rethought

The discussion of “information sovereignty” as a concept should start from examining the term “sovereignty” itself, which is the theoretical foundation stone. Vertically, sovereignty is a “changing” concept, while horizontally it is an “open” concept.

“The relationship between the very term sovereignty, the concept of sovereignty and the reality of sovereignty is historically open, contingent, and unstable” (Bartelson, 1995, p.2). In other words, the concept and reality of sovereignty vary with times, and the meaning of the term changes. Thus, sovereignty is an unstable or changing concept.

Vertically, or historically, the concept of information sovereignty has really been changing. Sovereignty, one of the most controversial theories in political science, would remind us of a long list of names, such as Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Austin, Hugo Grotius, etc. Who should hold the sovereignty? The Monarch, the people, the congress, or other government or political agencies? There have been different answers at different times.

Horizontally, sovereignty is not an isolated concept. It is related to, overlaps with, or complements other concepts. “The history of sovereignty ought to be studied not in isolation,” Jean Bartelson commented, “but in terms of its multiple relations with other concepts within larger discursive wholes, these not being necessarily confined to political ones.” (Bartelson, p.2) Without realizing the pluralistic nature we would regard sovereignty as an ossified and absolute concept.

Sovereignty is such a rich and unstable concept that it was even called a “convenient label”: “when distinctions began to be made between political, legal and economic sovereignty or between internal and external sovereignty, it was clear that the label had ceased to perform its proper function as a distinguishing mark for a single category of phenomena. The concept of sovereignty is likely to become in the future even more blurred and indistinct than it is at present.” (Bartelson, p.13) The “unstable”, “open” and practical characteristics of sovereignty can be applied when we try to analyze information sovereignty.

According to definition, information sovereignty refers internally to the supreme authority to make decisions about and to maintain order of information communication within the state; and externally to the equal and independent right to produce, transmit and use information free from any external interference or control. This concept, again, is not unchangeable. As we have demonstrated above, in the context of globalization when Internet and other new technology have altered our ways of communication, and the post-cold war era has shaped new forms of political, cultural and ideological patterns, the information sovereignty as a concept once so popular decades ago does not seem in nice conformity with today's situation, and hence no longer as applicable. It is time now for us to readjust our concept on information sovereignty.

There have been two extremes in international politics theories, the realistic tradition, on the one hand, represented by Thomas Hobbes, that views international politics as “all against all,” like gladiators fighting in an arena. On the other hand, the universalist tradition represented by Immanuel Kant sees international politics not as conflict among states, but in

essence the relationship among all men in the community of mankind that will eventually “sweep the system of states into limbo”. (Bull, p. 24). A third tradition of thoughts that stands in the middle between realism and universalism is internationalism represented by Hugo Grotius. The Grotian internationalism admits that states instead of individuals are the major actors of the international society, and believes that international politics “expresses neither complete conflict of interest between states nor complete identity of interest; it resembles a game that is partly distributive but also partly productive.” (Hedley Bull, p. 25)

The Hobbesians regard the world as a place governed by the law of jungle, a theory quite resembles the premises of “international class struggle” in many aspects. This kind of pessimism does not accurately represent the reality of the contemporary world. To the majority of the states the world today is mainly inhabited by rational members who share an international morality. Third world countries like China should not isolate themselves with a red label saying “information sovereignty”. It will be much wiser for us to abandon the endless disputes, break away from obsolete thinking patterns, and to adopt new concepts that enable us to face new reality and learn to be a competent player of the international game.

III.2 Cultural Imperialism and Hegemony Reviewed

While discussing the issue of information sovereignty one cannot avoid mentioning “Cultural Imperialism”. The definition of cultural imperialism most widely quoted by Chinese scholars is from the famous American media critic Herbert Schiller: “The concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the value and structures of the dominating center of the system” (Schiller, 1976, P. 9).⁶ The key phrase is “the modern world system”, which refers to the political-economic system dominated by the exploiting and aggressive international alliance headed by the United States. Cultural imperialism is a tool to serve the interest of that system.

Cultural imperialism, to put it in a simple way, means cultural domination, “of America over Europe, the ‘West over the Rest’, the core over the periphery, capitalism over more or less everyone”(K. Thompson, 1997, p. 122). The root of the concept can be traced to the time of the European colonialists in the 18-19 centuries, and the concept drew world attention from 1970's when heated debates went on in the UNESCO and continued to the mid-1980's when the U. S. withdrew from it.

The Chinese scholars tend to stress the association between cultural imperialism and hegemony: “Cultural imperialism refers to the external or internal hegemonical culture imposed by a society, class, estate, or group” (Shi, 2001). Other Chinese scholars coined the term “information hegemonical power” referring to those countries that “hold the predominant and monopolistic position in information technology and industry and use their superiority to impede, limit, suppress and sabotage other country's efforts to independently develop and use information.” These information super powers even tried to “impose their values and ideology upon other states for the purpose of pursuing hegemonical interest they could not obtain by political or military means.”(Niu, 2000.) However, cultural imperialism

⁶ Colleen Roach quoted this definition by Schiller in her article titled “Cultural Imperialism and Resistance in Media Theory and Literary Theory” (*Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 19, No.1, pp. 47-66, citation in p.53. London: Sage Publications. 1997.).

should not be regarded as imperialism in the strict sense of political science. *Cultural imperialism* functions more as a rhetorical or propaganda expression than an academic concept. So do the terms derived from it such as “cultural sovereignty”, “information hegemony”, “cultural safety”, “cultural invasion”, “information suzerain”, etc. Rhetorical or propaganda terms are aimed at attracting attention and creating sensation, not actually for the pursuit of truth.

The term cultural imperialism we discuss today is related to “cultural hegemony”, a theory proposed by Antonio Gramsci. A careful look at Gramsci's perspective of cultural hegemony shows the difference between the academic concept and the propaganda discourse. It is interesting that the incorrect understanding of Gramsci came just from the Chinese translation of the term itself. The word *hegemony* was translated as *baquan*, literally meaning *conqueror's might* in Chinese, a term usually related to rule by coercive and violent means. In our discussions cultural hegemony (*baquan*) is the synonym of cultural imperialism. The original meaning of Gramsci's hegemony is however much more sophisticated. More serious translators or researchers would prefer to render it as “leadership”, which is no doubt closer to the original meaning of Gramsci's Marxist argument when he proposed the use of “war of position” to “gradually capture the cultural leadership in the civil society, and overturn from inside the myth of the ever-lasting capitalism” (Chen, 1995).

The same word hegemony is translated into two Chinese terms that have very different meanings. In cross-cultural communication it is common for the translator to interpret the original message in his/her own way, and add his own explanation or opinion while converting it into another language. This kind of miscommunication is caused by two reasons. First, a misunderstanding of the original message in the source language. Secondly, a deliberate “revision” or “distortion” for the interpreter's own purposes. Unlike *Cultural Leadership*, *Cultural Baquan*, or *conqueror's might*, would easily be associated with invasion, coercion, violence and imperialism, hence is a term that can better serve the propaganda purposes.

The discussion of the translation of the term hegemony elicited a new question: How did “cultural imperialism” obtain its “cultural hegemony”? Could there be explanation other than the ones we are familiar with?

Prof. Yang Boxu of Peking University in China stated that “cultural dependence” is not a “state to state issue”, because nations are not the direct cause of the commercialization of culture or cultural imperialism, and “the real direct cause is corporate capitalism” (B. Yang, 2003). Those multinational corporations do not represent a nation, and their ultimate goal is to pursue profits. They try constantly to occupy and expand markets by “arousing and attract various desires of the audience” (B. Yang, 2003). In other words, the measures taken by the cultural imperialists are not threat or coercion, but attraction or seduction. From Mickey Mouse, Duck Donald, Marilyn Monroe, to Rock and Roll, MTV, NBA, Starbucks, etc., the success of all the popular cultural products depends upon how well they can attract customers. This sort of cultural “hegemony” achieved through the consent and recognition of the audience is closer in nature to “leadership” instead of *baquan*, the coercive might.

III.3 A Gradualistic Approach

Samir Amin, Antonio Gramsci, Noam Chomsky, Herbert Schiller, etc., these names of Western scholars and thinkers most famous for their critical attitude towards the capitalist system and its media, are most quoted in China. In the era of globalization when mass media

plays a major role in our daily life, these critics bravely exposed the evils and warned us against the danger and evils behind the glorious curtains of prosperity. We respect their independent thoughts and persevere fighting spirit, and their theories will be remembered and treasured as weapons for people in the developing countries to combat external exploitation and dominance.

There exists a huge “super market” of views and thoughts in the publications of Western scholars, and it would not be difficult to find a “product” from the shopping shelves to support your own argument, but it is common sense that we have to be very cautious when a theory is to be used to guide our actions. For example, the third world countries tend to welcome works and thoughts of the “leftist” Western intellectuals, yet it is often neglected that the leftist camp includes a large variety of schools and factions, from Marxists, social democrats, environmentalists to anarchists, etc. The moral is that, when we try to find the valid theory and implement it we should first consider and compare the historical background and the socio-political environment in question.

To face the challenges of information globalization, the tasks on top of the checklist for contemporary China is to change the present situation as an “information-weak” country. The fact is that China is “weak” in aspects like information infrastructure, and information technology and industry. China is actually at the initial stage of information development. In the analysis of development it is necessary to distinguish between and among different stages, namely, the initial or primary stage, the maturing stage, the florescent stage, and the declining stage. Each stage has its own features and problems, and should adopt pertinent strategies to solve those problems. Such a gradualistic approach might be more valid to estimate the current Chinese situation.

In the past two decades or so, the Chinese information and media industry advanced with the pace of “leap forward”. To take television as an example. Chinese TV channels have increased from about 100 channels in 1980's to 2,230 channels at present. The Chinese owned several dozen million TV sets in 1980's, but now they own 370 million sets. The audience of TV programs increased from 500 million to 1.2 billion during the same period of time.⁷ The development in China has drawn world attention, and friendly scholars abroad expressed their concerns about the social evils that would be brought by the commercialization of mass communication. They warned that if mistakes of the West were repeated, then media in China would also be alienated and reduced to the position of the slave of capitalism.

Their frank and valuable opinions will serve as timely warnings for us to guard against the negative consequences on the long run, but there is still a big gap between the overall strength of the Chinese information and media industry and that of the information-rich powers. For instance, in 2001 the profit of Time-Warner is 27.2 billion USD, that of Viacom is 15.2 billion, and 10.2 for Disney, but the income of Chinese Radio and TV Broadcast Group, the biggest Chinese media conglomeration, earned only 1.3 billion that year. As was stated above, China is still at the initial stage with regard to the structure, system, mechanism and market development of the information and media industry. Just as a thin and weak baby needs food and nutrition instead of a diet to reduce weight, the current strategy for broaden and strengthen the information infrastructure and media industry is generally correct. Without

⁷ Weiguang Yang. "To Build Up the Scale and Power of the Chinese TV Industry". Speech at Shanghai University of Communications. Aug. 3, 2003.

necessary basic power strength all the slogans like “Safeguard our information sovereignty,” or “Fight again media imperialism”, etc, would be nothing but empty talk.

IV. Conclusion: the new concept of Information Sovereignty in an age of globalization

Half a century has passed since the first man-made satellite Sputnik was launched, yet the debate on information sovereignty has never died out. The developing countries stressed the importance to respect every country's cultural sovereignty against the information hegemony of the strong powers, whereas the “information powerful” states propagated the decline of sovereignty, and total freedom of information flow all over the world. The contemporary age, no matter how developed and globalized it is, and no matter what you prefer to call it, is still formed by nation states, and the existence of state sovereignty is the undeniable reality. Information sovereignty is a concept derived from state sovereignty, yet the former, being more influenced by cultural factors, bears characteristics different from the latter. In the context of multi-polarized international politics and information globalization, we need to re-examine the old concept of information sovereignty to deal with the new structure of international relations and global communication.

In the time of global communication, the multinational media corporations, driven by the cultural capital, “completed the cultural communication in the global scope with unexpected speed and forms. This is the 'cultural globalization' brought by the so-called 'economic globalization'.”(Sun, 2003). X + globalization has become fashionable terms, and that reflected the ever closer relationship among the countries in the world. In this process the interest of states are mingled, and the wise strategy of existence and development for any country is to actively merge into the megatrend instead of isolating oneself.

In the grand tide of information globalization only when a state is willing to “sacrifice” a part of its information sovereignty, for instance the right of absolute control over flowing-in information, can it obtain in exchange the rights and opportunities to better develop its information technology and industry, and share information resources with other states. The traditional defensive and protectionist strategy has proved to be too passivist and out of date. Developing countries should renew their perspectives to suit the new situation, design new strategies according to their own socio-political and cultural characteristics, and to build up their strengths in all aspects. This should be the right way to resist external cultural aggression and to keep their own rights for existence and development.

To sum up, developing countries like China need to develop new concepts of information sovereignty to replace the old ones. Namely, what we need is

- The relative, not absolute concept of information sovereignty;
- The open, not closed sovereignty;
- The progressive, not defensive sovereignty;
- The pragmatic rather than rhetorical sovereignty.

We agree with the Grotian viewpoint that the best typified international activity “is neither war between states, nor horizontal conflict cutting across the boundaries of states, but trade - or, more generally, economic and social intercourse between one country and another.” (Bull, p. 25) There are so many schools of thoughts in international relations study, but us developing countries the valid theory should enable us to pursue goals like rationalistic

cooperation, peaceful development and mutual prosperity, etc. This is also an approach to the ideal goal for a new information order in the context of globalization.

China experimented with new international communication policies. For example, China invited Murdock's News Group to broadcast programs to designated areas in the mainland. The News Group reciprocally waged the campaign to "let the world understand China", and helped Chinese programs to be received by audience in the U. S.. Consequently the programs of Chinese Central TV Channels 4 and 9 can now be received by over 1.5 million households in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and other cities.⁸ Although a trial measure, it has a far-reaching significance in that it represented a new concept of information sovereignty, the open, progressive and practical perspective leading to a new way out.

References

- Bartelson, Jens. (1995) *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bull, Hedley. (1977) *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. (2nd edition) New York: Columbia University.
- Chen, Yan-gu. (1995) Hegemony (Coercive Might or Leadership). *Reading (Du Shu)*. Vol. 2.
- Hamelink, Cees, J. (1993). Globalism and National Sovereignty. Chapter in Nordenstreng, K. & Schiller, H., eds. (1993). *Beyond National Sovereignty: International Communication in the 1990s*. New Jersey: Ablex.
- Ma, Feicheng, & Chen, Yue. (1998) The Management of Information Resources in the Context of High-Speed Information Network. *Journal of Chinese Library Science*. Vol. 3.
- McChesney, Robert W. (1999) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. Quoted from the Chinese translation. Tr. By Xie Yue. Xinhua Press. 2004.
- Naisbitt, John. (1982) *Megatrends*. New York: Warner Books, Inc.
- Negroponste, Nicholas. (1996) *Being Digital*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Niu, Junfeng. (2000) Information Security: the Status quo in China. *The People's Liberation Army Daily*. Nov. 9.
- Nordenstreng, Kaarle & Schiller, Herbert I., eds. (1979). *National Sovereignty and International Communication*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co. p. 129.
- Nordenstreng, Kaarle & Schiller Herbert I., (Ed.). (1993). *Beyond National Sovereignty: International Communication in the 1990s*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp.
- Schiller, Herbert I., (1976). *Communication and Cultural Dominance*. NY: International Arts and Sciences Press.
- Shi, Xufu. (2001) On Cultural Imperialism. *Journal of the Heilongjiang Farm Normal School*. Vol. 4.
- Smith, Mary John. (1982) *Persuasion and Human Action*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company. p. 274.

⁸ Figures released in *Star Media-China Report*. Issue 11. June, 2004. p. 7.

- Sun, Shuping. (2003) Develop Advanced Culture to Resist Cultural Hegemony. *Journal of Changzhou Information Technology College*. 2nd Issue, Vol. 2. June.
- Thompson, Kenneth, ed. (1997) *Media and Cultural Regulation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Toffler, Alvin & Toffler, Heidi. (1995) *War and Anti-War*. New York: Warner Books.
- Wang, Huning. (1994) Cultural Expansion and Cultural Sovereignty: the Challenge to the Concept of Sovereignty. *Journal of Fudan University*. Vol. 3.
- Xie, Xiaojuan. (2003) Reflections on cultural security and cultural sovereignty. *Vanguard Theories*. Vol. 1.
- Yang, Boxu. (2003) From International Communication to Global Communication and Local Communication. *Journalism and Communication Research*. Vol. 3.
- Yang, Weiguang. (2003) To Build Up the Scale and Power of the Chinese TV Industry. Speech at Shanghai University of Communications. Aug. 3. www.people.com.cn. 18:58.
- Yu, Xiaoqiu. (2001) Reflections on Issues Concerning Information Technology and State Security. *Modern International Relations*. Vol. 3.