

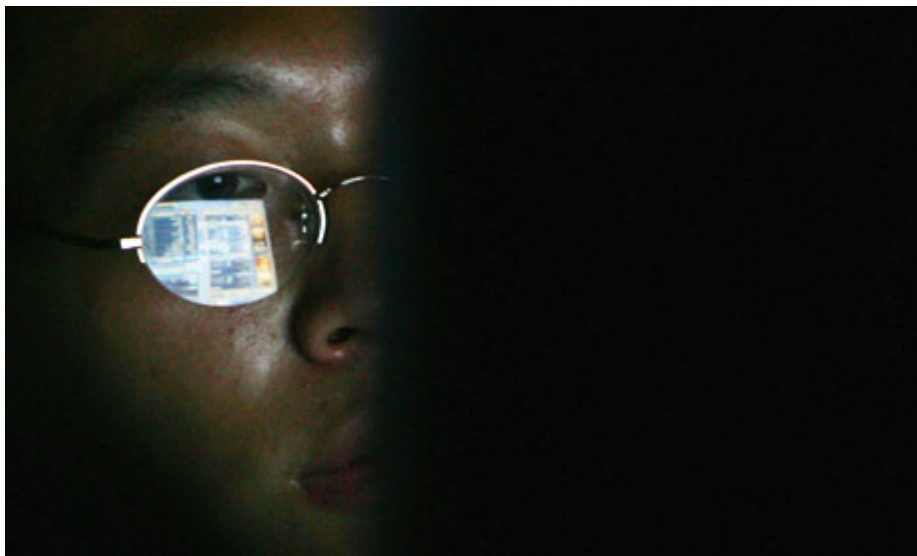
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China's Great Firewall not secure enough, says creator

Father of internet censorship system says people are using virtual private networks to look at banned websites

Tania Branigan in Beijing
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A young Chinese man on the internet. The architect of the Great Firewall says users are 'climbing the wall' to look at censored websites. Photograph: Cancan Chu/Getty Images

The architect of the Great Firewall – the censorship system blocking huge portions of the web for China's 450 million internet users – says further tightening is needed to halt attempts to overcome its controls.

Dr Fang Binxing told a Chinese newspaper there was a battle between the apparatus and technologies such as virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow users to "climb the wall" and look at banned sites.

"So far, the GFW [Great Firewall] is lagging behind and still needs improvement," said the man known as its father.

The rare interview is published in the wake of Hillary Clinton's pledge that the US would

spend \$25m (£15m) this year helping online users to evade such controls and amid a debate on the role Facebook and Twitter played in uprisings in Egypt and other parts of the region.

China's censorship system – thought to be the most comprehensive and sophisticated in the world – was already under increased scrutiny after Google moved its Chinese search service to Hong Kong last year, citing tightened censorship and intrusions into its system.

Fang, the 50-year-old president of the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, confirmed he was head designer for key elements of the great firewall, which filters sensitive keywords and blocks other sites completely, but declined to discuss how it worked.

Earlier this year he closed a microblog within days of opening it after thousands of Chinese users left comments on his account in just three hours – almost all of them critical. They attacked him as "a running dog for the government" and "the enemy of netizens".

"I regard the dirty abuse as a sacrifice for my country," he said.

"They can't get what they want so they need to blame someone emotionally: like if you fail to get a US visa and you slag off the US visa official afterwards."

He compared the firewall to traffic control: "Drivers just obey the rules and so citizens should just play with what they have."

Calls to expand access to information were a soft power threat from overseas, he said.

"Some countries hope North Korea will open up its internet. But if it really did so, other countries would get the upper hand."

Fang said most countries had some controls on internet access.

But Chinese bloggers argue that Beijing's wide-ranging controls on both domestic and overseas material go far beyond the blocks that many countries place on content such as child pornography or terrorist-related material. China not only censors much more content, but has a deliberately opaque system in which no one can be sure who is censoring what, or on what grounds. There is no transparency, still less any possibility of challenging such decisions, as happens in other countries.

Earlier this week, China's foreign ministry spokesman, Ma Zhaoxu, said again that internet users enjoyed freedom of speech "in accordance with the law".

Asked about Clinton's speech, he said: "China objects to any country's interference with

China's internal affairs under the banner of internet freedom".

Censors appear to be most concerned by video, Chinese language material and social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Human rights group sites and other sensitive material in English is also blocked. But while such measures are a source of frustration to a growing number of people, many users mostly go on the internet for shopping or entertainment, prefer Chinese sites and seem relatively indifferent to the constraints.

Fang revealed that he personally used more than six VPNs at home, but said he only used them "to test which side wins" in the battle between the firewall and VPNs.

"I am not interested in reading messy information like some of that anti-government stuff," he said.

Michael Anti, a well-known Beijing-based journalist and blogger, said Fang was living in a "parallel universe" to most people.

"Even the Chinese government hesitates to talk about censorship. The father of the great firewall thinks it's an honour [to have invented it]. To us, that attitude is worse than the censorship itself," he said.

"The Chinese government keeps strengthening censorship more and more, but information is growing. It's a cat and mouse game."

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