

No one disputes that the government's decision to sign the cross-strait service trade agreement was both arbitrary and crude. In response to this criticism, however, the government — apart from attempting to co-opt anyone who would potentially stand to benefit from the agreement and answering their concerns with a lot of empty talk — does nothing to address the asymmetric access to information either side of the Taiwan Strait, and this is likely to create many problems for Internet users.

Taiwan has never had the necessary understanding and vigilance when it comes to imports and use of Chinese Internet communications equipment and computer services. There are three main reason for this: The first reason is the inherent disadvantage from users who lack information about technical or operational issues. The second is because of a lack of information transparency. The third is that awareness of Internet freedom is not sufficiently widespread.

However, “necessary understanding and vigilance” does not have to involve animosity toward China. Rather, it points to the fundamental understanding of the Internet era that any normal and rational democracy should possess: the understanding that people should have communications freedom, the right to privacy, freedom to obtain information and freedom of expression.

The government insists that the deregulation of value-added network services and Internet portals offering Web hosting and other such computer services is a “less important” area of deregulation. However, anyone with an understanding of basic Internet infrastructure understands that businesses offering such value-added network services function as guardians of the Internet. Companies operating Internet portals or offering Web hosting are granted access to a wide range of information from their users. If we add the various types of software and hardware services that will also be deregulated, it could be described as setting up a small but complete Internet framework that none of us can escape.

It is well known that Chinese telecommunications and Internet service providers comply with the Chinese government's demands to provide strict monitoring of Internet communications. Not even well-known international companies such as Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can avoid the filters in the Chinese market. One of the main reasons international Internet companies cannot relax is that this kind of compliance culture — in which everyone follows everything the Chinese government says — is negatively affecting free and democratic countries.

Given the different control frameworks that are in place on each side of the Taiwan Strait, we can only speculate as to which framework will apply when Chinese companies move into Taiwan. There are many questions surrounding this issue:

How will the Taiwanese government audit these companies? Does it have a complete set of measures in place to protect users? If a company's operations pose a risk to safety and property, what measures are in place to help users get compensation? As operators used to adhering to China's Internet control culture enter the Taiwanese market, how will Taiwan's Internet freedom and Internet culture be affected? Has the government made any detailed impact assessments? If they have, why do they not make the results public?

The government has a duty to tell us what position normal and rational democracies take on opening their country's telecommunications and computer services to foreign operators — those backed by Chinese capital in particular — and what rules they impose. It should also tell us how these countries enter into democratic dialogue and debate with their critics. International trade stresses complementarity in order to maximize results, but it does not deny that participants following the rules of international trade should protect their freedom and democracy.

The government has a duty to clarify which complementarity effects the service trade agreement will have on Internet freedom. The practical foundations, the controls in Taiwan and China and any risk impact assessments, are all part of the due process that should be an integral part of the service trade agreement.

None of us want to be part of a decision that harms the country, and we do not want to become the victims of such a decision. Focusing on the freedom and prosperity of consumers and users: should our Internet use be decided by the cross-strait service agreement?

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Trade agreement and the Internet

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