The internet and possibilities for counter accounts: some reflections

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to extend the debate about the emancipatory potential of the internet by commenting on the papers in this issue by Gallhofer *et al.* and by Paisey and Paisey.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper locates the internet within the politics of neoliberalism.

Findings – The internet is just another technology and its use and influence depend on the social and political contexts. The internet is not seen as a panacea but rather as a communicative device which has the potential to facilitate change. Whether that is realised depends upon how the counter accounts and critiques disseminated through it connect with the common sense of the people.

Originality/value – The paper encourages engagement with technology and also persuades readers to develop counter accounts and critiques of contemporary social problems.

Keywords Internet, Online operations, Social problems, Pensions, Democracy, Generation and dissemination of information

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

It is now commonly accepted that advances in information technologies in general, and in the internet in particular, have transformed notions of time and space, and have enhanced our ability to provide information and to communicate, both locally and globally. By eliminating territorial boundaries, the internet has created possibilities for emancipatory education and the repositioning of social subjects. By providing opportunities for dialogue, and for the sharing and mobilising of ideas, the internet has created possibilities for forging new imagined communities and reshaping the global political economy to prioritise multi-accented discourses of democracy, justice, freedom, equality and good life. In many ways this is a continuation of earlier struggles for universal suffrage and workers' rights, where calls for reforms were based on counter accounts and critiques, which resonated with the common sense of the people (Thompson, 1968).

However, unlike these previous struggles, contemporary battles are not just about the policies of the state, but are also about corporate power and the consequences of capitalist ideologies. With the weakening of the traditional left and trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), often operating at the margins of the state apparatus, law and conventional centres of politics, have particularly embraced the internet. These sites of resistance frequently analyse and campaign on a narrow set of issues and rarely offer a comprehensive and coherent political programme of reform for

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society as a whole. Nevertheless, such activities have helped to expand and rejuvenate the "public sphere" (Habermas, 1989) and to articulate demands previously confined to the private realm. Such demands have the potential to change the moral, legal and public policymaking climate of our times. The potential of the internet to mobilise people is evident, for example, in the promotion of ecological concerns and opposition to the invasion of Iraq. It has been used by oppressed minority groups to articulate their demands and to develop courses of action (Hayden, 2002). Such isolated successes, however, have not transformed quality of life, social relations of power or reduced inequality and exploitation, all of which depend upon continuing critiques of institutionalised structures and dominant political philosophies.

The internet is hailed as an important new technology, but no technology, no matter how easily accessible, can facilitate emancipatory change unless its use is accompanied by an extensive critique of contemporary power relations and its fault lines. The potential of the internet for advancing competing discourses and making counter accounts available to a wide audience is ably articulated by Gallhofer *et al.* (2006). Paisey and Paisey (2006) report that corporate web sites rarely provide any counter accounts or emancipatory information which would enable their audiences to critique the politics of pensions. They also report that despite the recurring deepening crisis of pensions, trade unions, NGOs and other concerned groups have been slow to mobilise the internet. This could be the result of an unwillingness to adopt new technologies or a reliance on traditional face-to-face communication to mobilise people. Nevertheless, it raises broader questions about politics and the use of the internet to invent new possibilities.

The provision of information about exploitation and inequality provides some food for thought, but the possibilities of emancipatory change or a "war of positions" (Gramsci, 1971) requires that the contradictions of the underlying philosophies and structures be brought under scrutiny. By facilitating critiques of contemporary issues, web sites can help to deepen the crisis, weaken the forces in ascendancy and create possibilities for emancipatory change. Many of the web sites examined by Gallhofer *et al.* (2006) and Paisey and Paisey (2006) seem to be concerned with the consequences of neoliberalism, the dominant political ideology of our times and the driving force behind globalisation. Neoliberalism plays a key role in the creation and obfuscation of contemporary exploitation, inequalities and social relations. Its visible hand in the construction of the contemporary pensions crisis encourages reflections upon possibilities for change.

This paper consists of three further sections. The first section draws attention to fault lines of neoliberalism which obstruct the advancement of freedom, democracy and equality. Such lenses enable us to see the debate about pensions not as an economic problem, but as a social problem nurtured by the state, corporations and contemporary power relations. Therefore, the second section provides a counter account of the contemporary pensions crisis. The third section concludes the paper with a summary and discussion of the role of the internet in facilitating emancipatory change.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has deep philosophical roots (Harvey, 2005). Following the ideological triumphs of the New Right, it is deeply entrenched in the USA, the UK and much of the

West, and is increasingly being offered as the only viable political philosophy to the rest of the world. Neoliberalism is, however, riddled with fault lines. It claims to value society and democracy, promising freedom and equality, but fails to adequately deliver either. Furthermore, neoliberalism fails to address deep-seated divisions relating to class, gender and ethnicity. Within the framework of capitalist power relations and constitutional rights, citizens are invited to cast their votes at regular intervals (every four/five years) to elect governments. However, beyond this organised ritual they have little input into political processes, and capitalist relations are rarely subjected to any explicit democratic choice. Virtues of democratic society are frequently encapsulated by celebrating entrepreneurialism, individualism and competitiveness. Notions of "freedom" are frequently used to advantage trade and business, and governments have set the corporation free to hire fire, relocate, downsize and plunder.

Under the guise of reducing bureaucracy, red-tape and providing a slimmed down government, neoliberalism has weakened trades unions, markets have been deregulated and swathes of publicly-owned industries have been privatised, often at knockdown prices (Mitchell and Sikka, 2005). The traditional functions of government, even those relating to policing, security, incarceration, health and education have been handed to corporations primarily concerned with maximising profits and appeasing stock markets. The neoliberalist agenda is advanced by a variety of ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971), including think-tanks, newspapers, magazines, radio and a variety of institutions. These often advocate a minimalist state, mainly confined to the protection of property rights and national security rather than the advancement of democracy and equality. The very idea of society and public obligations is decried as it obstructs individualism. As Stuart Hall puts it, "the very idea of the 'social' and the 'public' has been liquidated" (Hall, 2006, p. 15). Rather than aspiring to rebalance power asymmetries or to redistribute wealth, the neoliberal state only aspires to help individuals enter the market. Citizenship rights are increasingly being replaced by consumer rights. Those without the necessary financial resources are either disenfranchised or encouraged to blame their misfortunes on profligacy, lack of hard work and foresight, rather than on the visible hand of social relations, elite networks, corporate power or mobilisations of the state.

The inherent crisis of capitalism and headline scandals problematise the hegemony of neoliberalism, which also create a crisis of legitimacy for the liberal state, but these are often managed through appeals to corporate governance codes and rhetoric of transparency, which are always found wanting and rarely redistribute wealth, or give enforceable rights to citizens (Bakan, 2005). Corporate elites object to what they call "big government" unless it serves their own ends through subsidies, tax avoidance and diminution of employee rights. The usual response is to foreclose all public policy choices by claiming that "there is no other alternative", or "there is only one way". Such issues are present in the paper by Paisey and Paisey (2006), where the state and corporate elites are effectively telling the people that the decent provision of pensions requires that workers need to work longer and save more and that "this is the only way". The think-tanks (e.g. Pensions Commission, 2005) sponsored by the state-corporate nexus ignore the role of the state, corporations and their policies in creating the pensions crisis. The challenge is for web sites to disseminate counter accounts and critiques that expose the deeper fault lines of neoliberalism. The next section attempts to provide an illustration of such an account.

Pensions

The UK pensions crisis[1] highlighted by Paisey and Paisey (2006) is best seen as a failure of neoliberalism to deliver promised equality and freedom. It is rooted in gross inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth and the politics of class, gender and race and has been nurtured by the state policies privileging the power of corporations to act irresponsibly, all because it somehow aids efficiency and enhances returns to capital. Whilst Paisey and Paisey (2006) present an excellent history of the pensions crisis in the UK, it is worth retracing its recent political economy.

It has become very fashionable to blame the UK pensions crisis on demographic trends and falling birth rates. Such trends affect the rich as well, but there is little evidence of a pensions crisis for company executives, newspaper editors, financial speculators, ministers, legislators, bank managers, judges, accountancy firm partners or managers of pension funds. While the average retirement age is 65 for men and 60 for women, nearly eight out of ten company bosses in Britain are able to retire at 60 and on average receive a pension 26 times higher than the average worker (Seager, 2005). The average annual pension of a director of a quoted company is around £167,000, compared to that of £6,344 for private sector workers, whilst workers in healthcare averaged only £5,400. These differences are also the outcome of inequitable distribution of wealth and income.

During its term in office (1979 to 1997), the New Right, or Thatcherism, encouraged entrepreneurship by curbing trades unions and workers' rights but showed little interest in curbing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income. The same political project, albeit with some modifications, such as a fairly low national minimum wage[2], has continued under the present Labour administration. Britain is the world's fourth richest country, but the "gap between the highest-paid and the lowest-paid workers is greater than it has been for at least fifty years" (Giddens, 1998, p. 105). Since 1997, the top 1 per cent of earners doubled their wealth to £797bn. This elite owns 23 per cent of the nation's wealth, up from 20 per cent in 1986. In sharp contrast, the poorest 50 per cent saw their share of the nation's wealth shrink from 10 per cent in 1986 to 5 per cent in 2002 (*Daily Mail*, 8 July 2005). The number of UK citizens living on less than half of the average income has tripled since 1978. Up to 30 per cent of the population has not shared in any gains in economic growth since 1979 (Hutton, 1999, p. 180). Black and Asian families are in the poorest fifth of the income distribution (UK Department of Social Security, 1999). The government acknowledges that the "proportion of people in low incomes in absolute terms has remained roughly constant since 1979 despite average income growth of over 40 per cent" (UK Department of Social Security, 1999, p. 27).

These inequalities are further compounded by disproportionate salary increases for corporate executives and employees (Sikka *et al.*, 1999). Between 1997 and 2004, the average British chief executive's total annual pay soared 80 per cent from £955,000 to £1.7 million (*Daily Mail*, 21 March 2005). During 2004, directors of major companies received an average salary increase of 18 per cent, whilst ordinary workers received between 3 per cent and 3.5 per cent and barely kept pace with inflation (BBC News, 2005). Non-executive directors received an average increase of 13 per cent (personneltoday.com, 2005), with some getting 21 per cent and receiving payments of £42,000 for relatively few hours work each year (*The Times*, 18 July 2005). Despite the outlawing of gender discrimination under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, full-time female workers on average earn more than 20 per cent less than their male counterparts, whilst for part-time female workers the gap increases to 40 per cent (*The Guardian*, 29 December 2005). In 2003, 270,000 employees were still paid less than the legislated minimum wage (National Statistics, 2005). In 2005, nearly 2,400 employers were investigated for failing to pay the national minimum wage to their employees (*Daily Mail*, 22 December 2005).

In the year 2004/2005, almost two-thirds of the UK population had income below the national average[3] of £427 per week, which translates as a median income of just £349 per week (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2006). Government statistics show that average weekly incomes of families in the top 10 per cent is £658 a week or more, whilst the bottom 10 per cent averaged only £164 per week. Since 1997 the top 10 per cent of the population has secured a weekly increase in its income of £119 compared to only £28 for the lowest 10 per cent of the population (*Daily Telegraph*, 24 August 2005). Such amounts are barely adequate to enable people to provide food, shelter, clothing and education for themselves and their families[4]. The average house price in the UK is now nearly £175,000 (and even more in London and the southeast) and beyond the reach of the average citizen (*Daily Mail*, 6 April 2006). The number of first-time house buyers is at a 25-year low. Where people can afford to buy a house, 20-40 per cent of their after-tax income is taken up by mortgage repayments, leaving precious little to put away for pensions.

In the face of rising income inequalities, 42 per cent of UK adults have no pension provision and 70 per cent have little or no meaningful savings (UK Financial Services Authority, 2006; *The Guardian*, 28 March 2006). Nearly 52 per cent of female workers are unable to pay anything into a company or private pension scheme (*Daily Mail*, 23 March 2006). More than 12 million UK employees have no occupational pension, with unskilled workers faring especially badly (BBC News, 2002). Despite being a wealthy country, the UK provides one of lowest state pensions in the western world. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), British state pension, when measured by the proportion of average post-tax salary, ranks 26th on a list comprising 30 western nations. On average UK citizens can expect[5] to receive a state pension of around 48 per cent of their post-tax earnings, which is considerably below the rates for Luxembourg, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Spain and Turkey[6]. The basic UK state pension for a single person is £4,381 per annum and that for a married couple is £7,007 per annum[7]. Owing to child bearing, child rearing and employment discrimination only 23 per cent of UK women retiring at 60 qualify for the full basic state pension. Some are able to supplement it by private provision, but surveys show that some 17 per cent of UK pensioners live on less than £5,000 a year, while 27 per cent are struggling on between £5,000 and £10,000. Just 4 per cent of people receive pensions of more than £25,000 a year (*Daily Mail*, 8 December 2005)[8]. Almost two million pensioners live in poverty – over half a million over-65s are undernourished and risk ill-health due to poor diet and in 2004-2005 more than 31,600 pensioners died from cold and related illnesses because they could not afford to heat their homes (Age Concern press release, 21 December 2004; *Daily Mirror*, 16 May 2006). The situation is set to become worse as "only one in four private sector employees are now members of good employer pension schemes" (Trade Union Congress press release, 28 December 2005, available at: www.tuc.org.uk/the_tuc/tuc-11186-f0.cfm (accessed on 30 April 2006).

In addition, successive governments have too easily accommodated corporate demands and have failed to develop laws to protect stakeholders. As a result, any savings put into pension schemes are not safe and the returns promised by the finance and insurance industries are not delivered. Millionaire Robert Maxwell looted his employees' pension fund (UK Department of Trade and Industry, 2001). His empire was audited by Coopers & Lybrand (now part of PricewaterhouseCoopers), which "consistently agreed accounting treatments of transactions that served the interest of RM [Robert Maxwell] and not those of the trustees or the beneficiaries of the pension scheme, provided it could be justified by an interpretation of the letter of the relevant standards or regulations" (UK Department of Trade and Industry, 2001, p. 315). The firm's senior partner told the audit team that "The first requirement is to continue to be at the beck and call of RM [Robert Maxwell], his sons and staff, appear when wanted and provide whatever is required" (UK Department of Trade and Industry, 2001, p. 367).

In the buoyant stock market of the 1980s and the 1990s, the values of pension scheme assets rose. Surpluses should have been used to provide higher pensions, or earlier retirement for employees. Instead, many companies reduced their contributions to boost reported profits, dividends and, hence, executive pay (Smith, 1996). There was little opposition to such practices from auditors or accounting standard setters. The exact amount of "contribution holidays" is not known, but UK trades unions estimate that during the 1990s alone, major companies avoided making some £19 billion of agreed contributions to employee pension schemes (*The Observer*, 8 January 2006). When stock markets declined, the same companies unilaterally ended "final salary pension" for their workers. No company has volunteered to return the foregone contributions though they have opposed obligations to make good pension scheme deficits "because that could have an adverse effect on employment and push some small firms out of business" (*The Guardian*, 20 February 2006).

In the early 1980s, the Thatcher government persuaded many to come off state pension schemes and exercise "freedom of choice" by purchasing their own personal pension plans. Employers were not necessarily obliged (despite the terms of many occupational pension scheme trust deeds) to make a financial contribution to pension schemes, but the government offered an initial subsidy to encourage people to come out of the State Earnings Related Pensions Scheme and occupational schemes. Between 1988 and 1994, more than five million personal pensions were sold, often on the basis of misleading information. The purchasers lost some £13 billion on worthless pensions and other policies, though those marketing the schemes made millions in salaries, bonuses, perks and profits (Mitchell and Sikka, 2005). Millions of people invested in endowment mortgages and savings plans to generate income for their old age. This generated income for corporations, dividends for shareholders and high executive remuneration, but the promised pension income is unlikely to materialise. Some 16.7 million people can expect a shortfall of around £159 billion (*Daily Mail*, 5 July 2005, available at: www.thisismoney.co.uk/retirement/article.html?in_article_id=402002&in_page_id=6&ct=5 (accessed 29 April 2006).

Think-tanks established by the current UK government advocate higher income taxes on individuals and the raising of the retirement age[9] (Pensions Commission, 2005), but say little about contemporary tax burdens and whether ordinary individuals can afford to be burdened with additional taxes. The government could redistribute wealth and provide affordable pensions but in the age of reverse socialism such policies are rarely advocated. It gives tax relief on pension contributions, but due to income inequalities "55 per cent of tax relief goes to the 2.5 million higher rate taxpayers who make up only around 10 per cent of taxpayers" (Pensions Policy Institute, 2004, pp. 6-7). Under the legislative rules introduced in April 2006, individuals can put their entire salary into their pension scheme, up to a limit of £215,000 a year (*The Guardian*, 6 April 2006). At a marginal rate of income tax of 40 per cent this would enable them to claim tax relief of over £80,000. Individuals supplementing their state pension with a private pension can build a pot of £1.5 million (which will rise with future rates of inflation) and claim tax relief on their pension contributions. However, most UK citizens will not earn that amount of money during their lifetime.

Redistribution of wealth is the key to the provision of adequate pensions, thereby solving the "crisis", but is generally off the neoliberalist agenda. Skewed tax policies have deepened the pensions crisis. Since 1979, the UK government has shifted taxes away from capital[10] and wealthy[11] to consumption[12] with the result that the least well-off pay 28 per cent of their income in indirect taxes, whilst the richest pay only 11 per cent (*Daily Mail*, 8 July 2005). The top fifth of earners pay a smaller proportion of their income in tax than the bottom fifth (*New Statesman*, 7 March 2005). The UK Treasury could be losing more than £100 billion each year due to aggressive tax avoidance schemes (Lyssiotou *et al.*, 2004; Marsden, 2004) and many major companies pay little or no corporate tax (Sikka and Hampton, 2005; Murphy, 2006a,b). Some 65,000 wealthy individuals are estimated to have paid little or no income tax (*The Independent*, 28 October 2004). Faced with resistance from the elite, governments have continued to shift tax burdens away from corporations, which inevitably have reduced the disposable income available to citizens. For example, Mitchell and Sikka (2005) report that the UK income tax take increased from £48.8 billion in 1989-1990 to £114 billion in 2003-2004, while corporation tax over the same period increased from £21.5 billion to only £28.1 billion, barely forming 2.5 per cent of the GDP despite the fact that from 1990-2004 UK companies have been recording an average rate of profitability of 11.5 per cent against an inflation rate of around 3-4 per cent. The corporate share of the total UK tax take has dropped from 11.5 per cent in 1997/98 to 7.7 per cent in 2003/2004.

Pension scheme contributions are primarily invested in the stock market rather than in housing, schools, hospitals, roads and social infrastructure. As a result, the value of pension schemes is always vulnerable to speculative frenzies and bubbles. Bankers, financiers and stockbrokers always win because they receive commission whether the securities are bought or sold. The pension fund managers receive lucrative financial rewards for short-term gains, but escape accountability when their gambles don't pay off.

Summary and discussion

The internet represents the biggest advance in communication technology since the advent of the printing press. However, because it is still in its infancy and beyond the reach of millions of people (Dutta *et al.*, 2006), it is too early to come to any definitive conclusions about its effectiveness. It is colonised by corporate as well as radical groups seeking to change society. Nevertheless, it has the potential to expand the public sphere, though its control is subject to negotiations. Internet Service Providers

(ISPs) are corporations whose main motive is to produce profits rather than emancipatory discourse or to advance democracy and equality. Rather than the state censoring individuals, providers of ISPs can ultimately pull the plug[13]. Just as corporations and a variety of ideological state apparatuses have been able to use earlier forms of communication to disseminate preferred discourses, there is little reason to believe that similar control of communication through the internet is beyond them. Even in the age of the internet, such organisations have continued to portray the "pensions crisis" as a crisis of demographic trends, and blame workers for not having adequate savings or living irresponsibly by not providing for their old age. It is no surprise that corporate web sites rarely offer counter accounts of the pensions crisis (Paisey and Paisey, 2006), since doing so would draw attention to their questionable policies and social power. Instead, the counter account presented in this paper suggests that groups campaigning for equality, rights of workers and women, and welfare of the elderly are more likely to provide alternative explanations of the pensions crisis.

The internet is a decentralised communications technology, but its potential success in advancing democratic politics is dependent upon the social and cultural contexts in which it is located and operated. The mere appearance of information (which is always constructed by some interests) on the internet cannot transform contemporary power relations. The rapid exchange of information and discussion may give an appearance of freedom and equality, but emancipatory change requires the creation of new subject positions and this would depend upon dissemination of counter accounts, critiques and alternative policies, exposing the web of social relations that underpin contemporary social conditions. Whether or not competing discourses carry weight would depend upon the terrain that is prepared through analysis, critiques, institutional structures and the way they "interpellate" (Althusser, 1971) social subjects. In this process, the internet is likely to supplement rather than displace newspapers, magazines, meetings, newsletters, seminars, street theatre, posters, arts and other ways of communicating and building possibilities of radical change. However, the internet is not a one-way street. Anything that can be achieved by reformers can also be achieved by those with an interest in maintaining the status quo, especially as the latter invariably have considerable resources to exercise influence on the media, radio, television and the state.

Conventional analysis seeks to manage the pensions crisis by raising the retirement age and advocating higher income taxes on individuals. It barely addresses the role of neoliberalism in facilitating endemic inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth, or abuses by corporations. In contrast, the brief counter account of the pensions crisis above shows that it is inappropriate to regard it purely as an economic problem or a crisis of demographic trends. The pensions crisis is, above all, a failure of political ideologies, institutions and the policies pursued by successive governments. The counter account exposes the class and gender aspects of the pensions crisis, which does not seem to touch the wealthy elites. It personalises the issues by addressing or interpellating a variety of people in their established identities, whether male, female, workers, ethnic minorities, elderly and citizens concerned about distribution of income and excesses of corporate power. It ferments the possibilities of alternative accounts by exposing politics of corporate profits and partisanship of the state and encourages reflections upon how the wealth and income could be shared. It questions the key tenets of neoliberalism, which promise freedom, democracy and equality. It shows that even in a rich country, such as Britain, after a lifetime of work ordinary people cannot look forward to freedom from malnourishment, cold and homelessness. Thus, the critique goes far beyond the debates about demographic trends and instead raises questions about democracy, social exclusion, institutionalised discrimination, and the role of the state, corporations, regulators, auditors, the ethics of the finance industry and how to bring all these under democratic control. Such an analysis can be disseminated through the internet to deepen the crisis of legitimacy for the liberal state and create possibilities for change. Through e-mail groups, web sites and discussion forums it can stimulate debates to further the analysis.

The challenge then is that the internet be used to develop and disseminate counter accounts and critiques to expose the fault lines of neoliberalism and show that its rhetoric cannot match its practices. As the critique becomes established in the public sphere, people may be more willing to explore alternative policies and institutional structures. Such an outcome is likely to be more positive in the building of self-confident communities able to develop counter accounts and imagine possibilities for change.

Notes

1. The UK corporate sector may have a pension deficiency of between £100 billion and £160 billion (*Daily Mail*, 23 February 2006). The measurement of the "crisis" is inevitably dependent upon the application of accounting policies, which are malleable and can be used as a political tool to emphasise the "pensions" problem or otherwise.
2. In 1999, the national minimum wage was fixed at £3.60 per hour for workers 22 years of age or over. Since then it has increased a number of times. From October 2006, it is set to rise to £5.35 an hour.
3. This inevitably conceals inequalities and one region had an average income of just £253 per week (*Daily Mail*, 10 November 2005).
4. Due to changes in the funding of UK higher education, graduates leave university with an average debt of around £13,500 (*The Independent*, 27 April 2006).
5. It does not follow that people actually receive it since that depends on pension contributions and years in paid employment.
6. www.financegates.com/news/world_news/2005-05-06/oecd_05062005.html (accessed 28 April 2006). Also see www.oecd.org/dataoecd/7/54/35385805.xls (accessed on 28 April 2006).
7. www.opas.org.uk/TypesOfPensionScheme/statePensions/ (accessed 27 April 2006)
8. www.thisismoney.co.uk/credit-and-loans/debt news/article.html?in_article_id = 405581&in_page_id = 62 (accessed on 29 April 2006).
9. Due to physical frailties many people cannot extend their working lives.
10. Corporation tax was gradually reduced from 52 per cent to 30 per cent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2004).
11. Top rate of income tax was reduced from 83 per cent and 98 per cent to 40 per cent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2004).
12. The Value Added Tax (VAT), often known as General Sales Tax (GST) in some countries, was raised from 8 per cent to 17.5 per cent. There is a lower rate for domestic fuel and a few other goods (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2004).
13. Google and Microsoft have agreed to assist China to censor the internet (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4672518.stm (accessed on 27 April 2006).

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