Introduction

The Sociopolitical Internet in China

LOKMAN TSUI

Abstract   The internet is the latest phenomenon in China and has caught the attention of media and academia alike. However, attention has hitherto been primarily concentrated on the implications of the internet for China's democratization. What is still missing is the inquiry about the sociopolitical diffusion and development of the internet in China beyond the democratization frame.

Author's affiliation   Lokman Tsui is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, USA.

There is a long history of concern about how "new" technology affects sociopolitical development. The internet, in its role as a sequel to the fax machine, established during the Tiananmen student uprising, is the latest phenomenon in China, and has caught the attention of media and academia alike. So far, attention has been primarily concentrated on the implications of the internet for China's democratization. This special theme issue attempts to broaden the focus to inquire about the sociopolitical diffusion and development of the internet in China beyond the democratization frame.

Concerns about the impact of new, foreign-imported, technology on social norms have abounded ever since the 18th century when the West defeated China in the Opium Wars and China turned to import technology for modernization's sake.[1] This concern to conserve Chinese values while applying Western technology gave birth to the concept of *tiyong*, which entails "Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for practical use." It states a clear separation between the technology itself and the morals and values that shape its impact, diffusion, and use. This concept of *tiyong*—separation between technology on the one hand and morals and values on the other hand—was first applied with regard to railroads and arms, and it now continues to shape thought and development of the internet in China, and

of the modernization discourse in general. *Tiyong* is in sharp contrast with the underlying assumption behind all of the news stories in the Western media on the potential of the internet for democratization. These news stories imply that the separation between technology and its morals and values is impossible to uphold, rooting the belief in the inevitability of the democratizing effect of the internet because of its inherent liberal characteristics. *Tiyong* offers us a drastically different insight into an alternative normative approach, one that has a significant mark on the Chinese, with regard to thinking about the internet in China. Having a long history of utilizing imported Western technology while maintaining their distinct values, are the Chinese succeeding in doing just that with the internet? A more realistic and empirical approach is thus needed to assess the impact of the internet on democratization in China as well as other developments that such a democratization approach may be excluding. Is it possible to isolate the "democratizing" values of the internet and if so, what other values now shape the internet and its development in China?

With the introduction of the internet in China, two approaches in assessing its impact have been foregrounded. The first is a technological deterministic view which sees China as being woken up and "democratized" by the internet. Advocates of this view argue that in the case of the internet, the technology itself and the morals and values cannot be so easily disentangled, if at all.[2] They believe that in an authoritarian regime, the "inherent" characteristics of the internet will upset the power balance by breaking the information monopoly, freeing up China, leading to the teleological ideal of a liberal democracy. With this assumption in mind, many scholars, as well as the popular media, have been focusing on state actions, which attempt to slow down such a liberalization process. The main concern is therefore state censorship, control, and regulation. Studies so far have shown that it is quite possible to control and regulate the internet, contrary to the belief of the popular media.[3] Zittrain and Edelman have provided us with a technical analysis of this control, showing the irregularities in the blocking pattern of websites, and indicating that there is no one absolute central blacklist, that results in a messy but effective regulation.[4] The disjointed policy making on internet censorship is reminiscent of what Lieberthal has called the fragmented authoritarianism model, where authority, in this case what is censored and what not, is distributed along the lines of both function and rank, dispersing authority that runs recursively through the network, resulting in each node having at least two, if not more, censors.[5]

Yet, the limitations of such an approach are obvious. The short-term nature of reporting individual events leads to a neglect in observing whether there is a long-term durable progressive trend, rather than a repeat of a cyclical cat-and-mouse game where technology and regulation take turns in trying to catch up and stay ahead of the other. Apart from developments in censorship, regulation, and control, other issues are left unexamined, e.g. issues which pertain to how the internet is really changing our way of life. Another issue is the assumption that the Chinese population is repressed and awaits liberation—an assumption that is thin at the very best and in sharp contrast with the sentiments expressed online in China, a space that is teeming with nationalistic sentiments, whether against the USA, Japan, or Taiwan. The difference in approaches to the political impact of the internet is perhaps best illustrated by a comparison between hacker cultures of the USA and China. Where the internet has been a tool of antipolitics for American hackers, shaped by values such as privacy, freedom, and democracy, which also make up the very original characteristics of the internet, hacktivism has taken a wholly different target in China. Instead of what was originally conceived—the hackers targeting the Communist Party—Chinese hacker culture upholds their members as guardians of the country, protecting it against the malignant forces of the USA, Japan, and Taiwan. The disproportional attention for this approach has also led to a shortage of attention on other pressing issues. What, for example, is the effect of the digital divide, in creating inequality between those which have the internet and those without the internet? This and other issues need to be explored in a different approach that allows for a broader perspective than just regulation, censorship, and democracy.

An alternative approach to make sense of the internet in China begins with a different premise. Instead of taking a teleological assumption that the internet must lead to democratization, this approach presupposes that the internet takes shape in such a way allowed by the sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Technology is never isolated from a context but is always enmeshed in social constructs consisting of models of thought intertwined with habits, beliefs, and values in a specific culture. In the case of the hackers, nationalist ideology shapes the use of technology into pro-government hacktivism for Chinese hackers, whereas the prototypical hacker in the West is a devout libertarian—a clear example of where technology has yielded opposite uses based on different values.[6] Another example is with regard to social concern that sets and frames a particular stage for implementing regulation, making

it not only acceptable to the public but even creating a demand for regulation. Because of its historical connotation, associating a word like opium with instant messaging or online gaming triggers off an avalanche of social concern and sentiments; again, specific moral values in a Chinese context guide the development of the internet in a distinctly different way than originally conceived by the proponents of the democratization approach. Technology, just like its values, never falls onto totally uncultivated soil. The internet, in its forms as communication, technology, and a mass medium, has cultural legacies and sociopolitical contexts which influence the shape of its development and the pace and direction of its diffusion; any approach to analyze the internet in China needs to take these contexts into account. Adopting such an approach in this special issue, we hope to enrich our understanding of the internet in China in a larger context of the sociopolitical impact, which is much more than just matters related to internet control, regulation, and censorship.

The other four contributions in this themed issue, firmly rooted in the Chinese sociopolitical and cultural contexts, touch upon the issues of e-government, internet cafe regulation, and the effect of foreign policy making on the internet. The first article by Johan Lagerkvist shows us how techno-cadres, which he defines as the group of politicians who view ICT as a crucial component in the long-term strategy to advance China, envision administrative reform and how the internet can play a role in it. Lagerkvist lucidly describes the subtleties of power play within the different government factions, describing who these techno-cadres are, their achievements, goals and grand schemes, and in particular what role ICT plays in these plans. What is particularly striking is that problems in the implementation of ICT resurface in many other issues that pertain more to difference in interest clusters between the local and central governments, suggesting structural problems in organizational and bureaucracy factors rather than technological difficulties.

In her article on the development and transformation of e-government in China, Kathleen Hartford examines how the internet yields political productivity by creating a sense of efficacy for the citizens through improvement in interaction in electronic communication channels. Hartford's article focuses on the so-called "mayor mailboxes," an online service that allows ciizens to write to their mayors electronically to address issues of, mostly local, concern. Hartford compares the two different implementations of the same concept in Nanjing and Hangzhou, and shows us their relative success.

She argues that the mayor mailboxes have led to a greater degree of interaction between the government and citizens, resulting in a higher level of transparency, shorter response times, and in general, giving the citizens a sense that their concerns matter. Hartford's contribution fills in the gaps in existing research on e-governance that usually focuses attention on either Beijing or Shanghai. These mailbox services, compared to the so-called brochure ware governmental web sites, named such because they are the online equivalent of brochures, also show us how e-government is bringing about a degree of interaction and dynamics between the government and its citizens.

Hartford and Lagerkvist show how, contrary to being politically restrictive, the internet can also be politically productive, both focusing on how the internet can make the government apparatus more efficient and transparent. A common denominator in these two articles is empirical research. To determine the local impact of new technology, it is not sufficient to extrapolate using our existing frameworks of reality. Rather, precisely because of the relevance of the social setting, it is crucial that we engage in what is truly happening in the field and bring the ratio of empirical research in this field back in proportion.

An often overlooked area concerning the social impact of the internet is the concern of the people, as opposed to the government, with regard to regulation of the internet in general and of internet cafes in particular. In contrast to worries about unfettered access to information, there are arguably more worries about possible negative social effects of unregulated internet cafes, leading to poor or no safety regulations, inappropriate opening hours, allowing minors access to harmful content such as violence and pornography, as well as worries about the possible addictive nature of online gaming and instant messaging conducted within these cafes. In this regard, the article by Jack Linchuan Qiu and Zhou Liuning represents a pioneering work dealing with the issue of internet cafe regulation. They offer us a valuable framework to make sense of the often contradictory regulations by explaining the different factions and their respective stakes in the regulations. Using Dutton's "ecology of games" model, they describe how the regulation of internet cafes evolved over time, providing us with an insight on how the sociopolitical context shaped the development of internet cafes and its regulation. While closures of internet cafes are an often reported news item in the English media, Qiu and Zhou's article offers us a systematic way

of examining the context of the evolution of internet cafes that has been sorely lacking so far.

The sociopolitical and historical contexts guiding and shaping the development of the internet in China do not necessarily have to be restricted to the Chinese society or government, but can also be information interventions from other states, such as the USA. The article by Randolph Kluver deals with the impact of US foreign policy with regard to intervention in the information space known as the internet in China. Traditionally, the USA has had a strong interest in the information space of China, dating back to the free flow of information doctrine. Recognizing that the development of the internet is cutting across boundaries and interests of nation-states, Kluver offers us insight into the role the US government has played in stimulating but also restricting the development of the internet in China. He argues that the different expectations of the US government toward the internet in China as compared to the expectations of the Chinese government have created tensions that are responsible for some of the irregularities in policy making. He concludes with an overview of which measures each respective government has taken to deal with those tensions.

The internet in China has not received the attention it deserves so far in China studies. It has mostly been covered in the areas of political science or media studies, where the focus is on the democratization of the internet but where the specific context relating to knowledge about China is lacking, evident in a relative lack of empirical research. China studies is the perfect candidate to step in and help support the theories as set by the other disciplines, by employing historical and sociopolitical understanding specific to China. Precisely because the topic of the impact of the internet cuts across disciplines, providing the context is a crucial role that multidisciplinary China studies can and should take up. In its function as a bridge, the discipline should seek to bring the two disparate academic realities of China and the West together in order to enrich mutual understanding, a goal that is at the heart of comparative studies. A crucial step in this direction is translation of relevant articles.[7] While Western articles are often translated into Chinese, the other way around is by far not as common. Media studies have found China as a subject of research far more interesting than China studies have found the internet exciting, evident in the disproportional abundance of articles about the internet in China in media studies as opposed to articles coming from and published in China studies about the internet. Given the incredible rate of development concerning the internet in China—socially,

economically, or politically—it is time to change this lethargic attitude of China studies toward the topic of the internet in China; this theme issue is a humble contribution to this goal.

Notes

[1] Ssu-Yu Teng and John K. Fairbank, eds, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839–1923* (New York: Atheneum, 1963 [1954]), 50–1, 164–6.

[2] Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Lessig here argues that the code that makes up the internet is not as fixed as people believe, but rather the code is malleable and the so-called "inherent" characteristics of the internet are under attack by commerce, stifling innovation. See also, Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas. The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[3] See, for example, Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (1999/2000): 1–25; Michael Chase and James Charles Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 2002); Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, "Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (2001): 377–408; Lokman Tsui, "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China," *China Information* 17, no. 2 (2003): 65–82; Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Regimes* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

[4] Jonathan Zittrain and Ben Edelman, *Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China*, 20 March 2003, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/>, accessed 15 February 2004.

[5] Kenneth Lieberthal, "The 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and Its Limitations," in *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, ed. Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1–30.

[6] See for more information on the values and ethics of the Western hacker, Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984) and more recently by the same author, Steven Levy, *Crypto: How the Code Rebels Beat the Government: Saving Privacy in the Digital Age* (New York: Viking Press, 2001).

[7] A laudable effort has been made by Johan Lagerkvist in guest-editing an issue with translated articles of thoughts of Chinese intellectuals on the internet. See *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 35, no. 2 (2003/4), special issue: "Chinese Intellectuals' Thought on the Internet."

References

Chase, Michael, and James Charles Mulvenon. *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies.* Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 2002.

Harwit, Eric, and Duncan Clark. "Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content." *Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (2001): 377–408.

Kalathil, Shanthi, and Taylor Boas. *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Regimes.* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003.

Lagerkvist, Johan, guest ed. Special issue. "Chinese Intellectuals' Thought on the Internet." *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 35, no. 2 (2003/4).

Lessig, Lawrence. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace.* New York: Basic Books, 1999.

Lessig, Lawrence. *The Future of Ideas. The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World.* New York: Random House, 2001.

Levy, Steven. *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution.* New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984.

Levy, Steven. *Crypto: How the Code Rebels Beat the Government: Saving Privacy in the Digital Age.* New York: Viking Press, 2001.

Lieberthal, Kenneth. "The 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and Its Limitations." In *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, ed. Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton, 1–30. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Qiu, Jack Linchuan. "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces." *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (1999/2000): 1–25.

Teng, Ssu-Yu, and John K. Fairbank, eds. *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839–1923.* New York: Atheneum, 1963 [1954].

Tsui, Lokman. "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China." *China Information* 17, no. 2 (2003): 65–82.

Zittrain, Jonathan, and Ben Edelman. *Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China.* 20 March 2003, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/>, accessed 15 February 2004.