

# Editorial

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The exponential increase of Internet connectivity in China has generated a great deal of journalistic and scholarly work that has essentially documented the emergence of the Internet as an unprecedented, though censored, platform for public expression, and has assessed its political significance. Since quite early on, analyses have focused on the multiple shades of online public opinion<sup>(1)</sup> and political participation, with the influential roles played by public intellectuals, dissidents, and civil society organisations,<sup>(2)</sup> but also spontaneous or sponsored patriotic movements.<sup>(3)</sup> Debates have raged on whether the emergence of online popular culture among the youth, which often takes rather commercial, superficial, but also sarcastic forms, could lead to profound social change or on the contrary would feed into the regime's legitimising rhetoric on modernisation.<sup>(4)</sup> Studies have also shown the intricate interactions between online voices, the traditional media, and propaganda, through the circulation, amplification, or blocking of information,<sup>(5)</sup> and through measurements of government responsiveness to collective action.<sup>(6)</sup> Much attention has been paid to information control exercised by the Chinese government, notably in the form of the filtering system known as the Great Firewall, and of regulations forcing social network platforms to censor contents, as well as to the determinants of self-censorship on the users' side.<sup>(7)</sup>

Much less is known, however, about the more diversified forms of power that are embedded in Internet governance, broadly conceived as the incremental conception, implementation, regulation, management, and uses of Internet networks and services.<sup>(8)</sup> Political positions and ideological visions are embedded in technological choices, from the layout of physical networks and routers to the development of applications such as search engines and expression platforms. The crafting, implementation, and interpretation of regulatory measures are of crucial importance in framing the users' agency. The way industry players and service providers define business models may also channel users into certain types of practices or expose them to certain risks, for example in terms of privacy or freedom of speech. These issues are not only in the hands of governments and regulators, but also of a variety of more or less independent actors such as the technical community, self-regulation associations, private companies, individual developers, and even hackers. Users, either individually or collectively, also contribute to building the characteristics of the Internet, as they may or may not adopt online services, complain about particular features, or even use them in a way that was not foreseen by the developers or regulators.<sup>(9)</sup>

In the case of China, these various aspects of Internet governance can offer invaluable insights into the complex and often ambiguous (power) relationships between the local and central government, private actors, and Chinese citizens, and on the framing of the online public sphere. It is all the more important to document these aspects as China has become more assertive on the global stage, and now strives to push Chinese interests through technological standards, economic and cultural domination, and global Internet governance schemes. As a result, Chinese positions carry increasing weight on such global issues

as "net neutrality," copyright, privacy, and freedom of speech, to mention but a few.

This is not entirely uncharted research territory. Early studies provided important analyses on the development of Chinese telecommunications networks and infrastructures and on the reorganisation of the telecommunication sector in the 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>(10)</sup> particularly in the context of China's entry into the WTO in 2001.<sup>(11)</sup> Strict regulation of Internet service providers,<sup>(12)</sup> as well as marketisation,<sup>(13)</sup> have had ambivalent effects on information control. The specific formats of expression allowed by social networking platforms shape and are shaped by the forms of online contention and influence the viral character of online scandals.<sup>(14)</sup> It is also

1. Johan Lagerkvist, "The Rise of Online Public Opinion in the People's Republic of China," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2005, pp. 119-130.
2. Zhou Yongming, "Living on the Cyber Border: Minjian Political Writers in Chinese Cyberspace," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 46, No. 5, 2005, pp. 779-803; Jonathan Hassid, "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2012, pp. 212-230; Wang Jing, "NGO2.0 and Social Media Praxis: Activist as Researcher," *Chinese Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015, pp. 18-41.
3. Wu Xu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2007.
4. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (eds), *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2011.
5. Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009; Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2010.
6. Paul Minard, "Does ICT Diffusion Increase Government Responsiveness in Autocracies? An Empirical Assessment of the Political Implications of China's Internet," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96, 2015, pp. 1048-1069.
7. "China," OpenNet Initiative, 2009, <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/china> (accessed on 23 October 2015); Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2, 2013, pp. 326-343; Jason Q. Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)*, New York, The New Press, 2013; Séverine Arsène, "From Self-Censorship to Social Protest," *Revue Française de Science Politique (English)*, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2012, pp. 53-74.
8. Internet governance is distinct from e-government, which stands for the use of digital platforms to modernise public services and administrations. See for example Jesper Schlæger, *E-Government in China: Technology, Power and Local Government Reform*, Abingdon, New York, Routledge, 2013.
9. Éric Brousseau, Meryem Marzouki, and Cécile Méadel (eds), *Governance, Regulations and Powers on the Internet*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
10. Zhou He, "A History of Telecommunications in China: Development and Policy Implications," in Paul S.N. Lee (ed.), *Telecommunications and Development in China*, Cresskill, NJ, Hampton Press, 1997, pp. 55-87; Milton L. Mueller and Tan Zixiang, *China in the Information Age: Telecommunications and the Dilemmas of Reform*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997; Eric Harwit, *China's Telecommunications Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
11. Kenneth J. DeWoskin, "The WTO and the Telecommunications Sector in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 167, 2001, pp. 630-654; Richard P. Suttmeier and Yao Xiangkui, "Standards and the State: Chinese Technology Policy in an Age of Globalization," in Elspeth Thomson and Jon Sigurdson (eds), *China's Science and Technology Sector and the Forces of Globalization*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2008, pp. 79-117; Heejin Lee, Shirley Chan, and Sangjo Oh, "China's ICT Standards Policy after the WTO Accession: Techno-National versus Techno-Globalism," *Info*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2009, pp. 9-18.
12. Henry L. Hu, "The Political Economy of Governing ISPs in China: Perspectives of Net Neutrality and Vertical Integration," *The China Quarterly*, No. 207, 2011, pp. 523-540.
13. Johan Lagerkvist, "In the Crossfire of Demands: Chinese News Portals between Propaganda and the Public," in Jens Damm and Simona Thomas, *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 42-63.
14. Thomas Poell, Jeroen de Kloet, and Zeng Guohua, "Will the Real Weibo Please Stand up? Chinese Online Contention and Actor-Network Theory," *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 2013, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 1-18; Jonathan Sullivan, "China's Weibo: Is Faster Different?," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2014, pp. 24-37.

known that the algorithms implemented in Chinese search engines reflect political choices and commercial biases.<sup>(15)</sup> However these studies remain scarce, and much more scholarship is needed to analyse the various aspects of Internet governance in China.

This special issue is a contribution in this direction. The first two articles underline the reliance of the Chinese government's information control and propaganda on institutional arrangements and on the design of web platforms. Rogier Creemers analyses the recent reshuffling of the administrations in charge of Internet regulation as a means of centralising leadership and laying the groundwork for accelerated informatisation of the country, while reducing potential political risks by channelling sensitive contributions towards semi-private platforms such as the mobile application WeChat. He argues that although few of the recently announced measures are entirely new, taken together they show that the Chinese leadership has embraced informatisation as the backbone of a new approach to governance based on data analysis and ubiquitous control of social and political behaviour.

Drawing upon policy documents and observation of official microblogs, Angela Ke Li studies how the Chinese authorities have crafted a more personal, emotional approach to public opinion management in recent years, in accordance with the ideological turn of the current leadership and its "positive energy" motto. To this end, the authorities conducted crackdowns on critical Weibo accounts while co-opting a number of online opinion leaders, a process that deprived Weibo of its attractiveness as a rather open, public forum. Meanwhile, Internet users had been turning to WeChat, the semi-private, interpersonal design of which proved better adapted to both increasing demand for mobile networking and tighter political constraints. Simultaneously, as a cause and consequence of Weibo's unexpected fall in the Chinese Internet landscape, WeChat's specific information sharing arrangements contributed to the channelling of online critical discourse towards more discreet, maybe less influential spaces, although no less under surveillance.

The following two articles analyse the impact of Internet technical infrastructures and standards on the definition of a "Chinese" Internet, which is crucial to the strategic interests of the Chinese government. Séverine Arsène sheds historical light on the inclusion of China in the global Domain Name System, with the creation and management of such extensions as ".cn" or ".中国." This process shows how Chinese engineers and policy-makers have had to combine aspirations to cybersovereignty with the necessity of global interconnectivity by crafting more subtle ways to "localise" the Chinese Internet. This article underlines the weight of practical and technical constraints on the power relationship between private companies and the authorities. While the former may be ready to submit to a certain degree of control in order to provide more localised, efficient service, the latter can only impose limited administrative burdens on both local and foreign actors, for they could relocate part of their activities abroad.

Han-Teng Liao, comparing Chinese Wikipedia and Baidu Baike, shows that Chinese Wikipedia is designed to accommodate contributions and readership from all Chinese-speaking communities around the world, while Baidu Baike is more "mainland-centric" in a way that somewhat contradicts the Chinese leadership's aspiration to global soft power. These differences have emerged from the specific regulatory environments of both encyclopaedias, as well as from the normative principles of their founders, which translated into procedural, editorial, and linguistic choices. For example, Wikipedia's review process is entirely managed in a bottom-up

process in which privileged editors ("gatekeepers") are selected by the community, whereas Baike's contents are ultimately reviewed by Baidu's employees. Being based in California, Wikipedia is subject to much more liberal regulation in terms of freedom of speech, although the editors pay more attention to copyright issues than do Baike's editors. Baike's interface supports only simplified Chinese characters, while Wikipedia's interface was developed to accommodate not only traditional and simplified characters, but also some local variants in Chinese language.

All articles show how much ideological, political, and strategic considerations are embedded into technological choices, and result in particular online configurations, which in turn influence the agency of Internet users. Together, these studies also highlight the fact that these configurations are the result of interactions between multiple categories of agents, from the central leadership to the designers of Baike and Weibo, to engineers who represent China in global discussions on domain names, and to individual contributors and administrators of online encyclopaedias. With these contributions, this special issue intends to draw a multifaceted, nuanced vision of Internet governance of China.

Of course, many more aspects and actors could be documented that are not included in this special feature. We had hoped to include studies on the rise to success (or failure) of leading private companies or start-ups in the framework of the informatisation campaigns, for example. The development of mobile Internet, particularly in rural China and among marginalised communities,<sup>(16)</sup> would also deserve more attention, as would so many other perspectives. However this is a first step and a call to produce more scholarship on the various institutional, economic, and technological factors that contribute to shaping the Chinese Internet.

15. Jiang Min, "The Business and Politics of Search Engines: A Comparative Study of Baidu and Google's Search Results of Internet Events in China," *New Media & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2014, pp. 212-233.

16. In the footsteps of Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Working-class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-less in Urban China*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2009; Elisa Oreglia (ed.), Special feature: "The 'Sent-Down' Internet: Using Information and Communication Technologies in Rural China," *Chinese Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015.