Online Political Climate in China: Agency of Media and Netizens Amidst Authoritarian Regime

Ying Hui Tan

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/yinghui_tan/1/
Online Political Climate in China: 
Agency of Media and Netizens Amidst Authoritarian Regime 

TAN YING HUI 

U1230731J 

HS4008: Contemporary Chinese Institutions 

25 October 2015
Introduction

The Chinese market reforms in 1980s, along with advancement of communication technologies, witness an overwhelming and relentless influx of global information into China (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009). China’s new wealth is shared among its citizens and this distribution of resources increase their accessibility to the strong Chinese Internet infrastructure and technology, and thus boasts of having the largest population of Internet citizens (netizens) who now have entry into the wonderful world wide web of infinite information (Tang and Sampson, 2012). Meanwhile, China also laid claim on having the most sophisticated Internet control system (Liu, 2012), which can be seen as self-appointment as gatekeeper of online knowledge to preserve its political legitimacy, trying to limit access to its Chinese population to unfavourable politically sensitive information. The definition of ‘Internet governance’ is as followed: “the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet” (WSIS, 2005). In this literature review, we will explore how the government try to establish online dominance in attempt to manipulate political discussion, the effects on media agencies as well on public discussion by part of online Chinese netizens.

Government

Traditional media was highly centralized and seen as a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party’s national and provincial agendas (Chu, 1994). The common consensus is that they primarily serve the interests of the government through the dissemination of state propaganda under the guise of government policies (Tong 2009). Ideally, the government wish to have complete control of the media for amplification of its Party goals, however,
failed to consider unintended consequences of the market reforms led to media liberalisation which led to the downwards decline of the government’s ideological control (Chu, 1994). Decentralisation of the Chinese press industry, arising from profit-driven mentality in the press industry move towards appealing to the urban middle class masses, erodes the role of government’s mouthpiece and their accumulation of capital (Zhao, 2000).

The authoritarian government, paranoid of potential political threats, seeks to maintain a tight control over the media, especially on the online sphere (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). In order to let marketization of press proceed without compromising on political dominance, the government mobilised market rationalisation campaign as well as advance for press conglomerate both online and offline (Zhao, 2000).

Firstly, the government set agendas of which the media houses have to follow and influence public opinions accordingly (Tong 2009). Secondly, all of the state news agencies have their respective websites to make their presence online, which can also be seen as steering online political discourse in its desired direction via online propaganda and censorship (Brady, 2008). Meanwhile, Chinese cyberspace is vigilantly monitored by the government, where commercialised news portals in China are only allowed to broadcast news from the party-organ news establishments, and are prohibited from reporting organically (Brady, 2008). While state control and free markets seemed to be contradictions of each other, the resulting consequences from party’s obsession over media control have great impacts on the power dynamics especially for the emerging class in China (Zhao, 2000).
Media Agencies and Online Journalism

Market-oriented industrial restructuring had championed drastic changes in the press industry in which the commercial revolution witnessed a proliferation of market-driven, consumer-oriented, urban daily newspapers today (Zhao, 2008). Newspapers, so as to appeal to a larger audience, are more inclined to report a reflection of the dominant values and ideology (Tichenor et al., 1980). Media, consequently, have the ability to influence as well as its vulnerability to the influence of public opinion of the dominant groups (Tichenor et al., 1980). As such, in order to cater to the growing civil awareness and demands for unbiased information, these media agencies increasingly test the waters in the political-intolerant climate by reporting on pressing social problems (Zhao, 2008).

However, while economic reforms of the media and the emergence of the Internet pose serious threat to conventional news reporting, media production and its mandatory alignment along party’s interests are still kept under close supervision so as to continue to fulfil the government’s intended role for media as the state’s mouthpiece (Zhao, 2008). Caught in the delicate situation of juggling both the demands of the Party and market competition, these media agencies, including those online, practise caution and self-censorship throughout the entire process of deciding and disseminating news they choose to report (Tong, 2009). The constant looming threat of harsh clampdowns arising from pervasive surveillance and regulation on part of the government (Brady, 2008), Chinese netizens are dis-incentivised from discussing political issues through self-regulation (Li, 2010).

Despite under the supervision of the state, relative significant financial and editorial autonomy is exercised, in the form of metro papers, in the media industry (Lin, 2010). The market mechanisms inherent in commercialisation have led towards consumer-oriented structural bias by catering to the values and tastes of advertisers’ most desired demographic
population: the affluent, young and educated media consumers in the more developed urban markets (Zhao, 2008). Moreover, Tong (2009) argues that self-censorship, rather than stifle all political discussion, help prompt discussion instead as it employ skilful manoeuvre around political landmines to increase probability of publication of news (and hence increased accessibility to public) on highly politically-sensitive issues. In a way, self-censorship can be seen as a form of agency in which there is relative media freedom within the Chinese authoritarian media system (Tong, 2009).

Online journalism had also shifted towards more user-oriented, from the original journalist-centered, because of the greater interaction between the audience with the journalists on the online platforms (Chan, 2006). The online news consumers are progressively more participatory and thus their expressions of public opinion influence the salience, the delivery, and the contents of reporting of news (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). As such, the Internet provided a conducive environment where netizens have the opportunity to establish an alternative news discourse (Benkler, 2006).

Netizens

In addition to the increasingly decentralised and fragmented Chinese media, the Internet allows for multi-directional communication, which provides alternatives beyond the mainstream news media websites (Deuze 2003). Although the government tried to rein a strict control over the Internet, Chinese netizens still reported experiencing of relative amount of online freedom (Herold 2008). Tang (2013) posits that for the following reasons, there are active online political discussions and criticism: firstly, the Internet offers certain degree of anonymity which gives the illusion of a safe, infinite distance of the identity of user and his online comments. Secondly, the decentralisation of the Internet made it hard to effectively
maintain control over the vast broadness of online communities (Tang, 2013). Thirdly, moral outrage evoked by persistent social issues is translated in a robust criticism of the government and various injustices on online platforms (Tang, 2013).

The line between producers and consumers of information is made fuzzy on the Internet, where ordinary Internet users can be both a producer and consumer of content simultaneously (Deuze, 2003). Citizen journalism offers individual agency when the ordinary netizens have the ability, in various ways, to create and share with others their own information on a public space (Lagerkvist, 2005). The first form encompass submission of user-generated content into following production of news, the second through micro-blogging on (popular) online platforms, and the third is via offering of alternative online news sources, either through blogging of local news or reporting of ‘independent’ issues neglected by mainstream media (Ki & Kim, 2015). Citizen journalism leads to a phenomenon of ‘new media power’, or the ability to influence the perception of their world understanding and their subsequent actions (Couldry, 2000), which can pose as a serious threat to the monopoly of the selective reporting of current affairs and hence relatively achieve a more even playing field in terms of power dynamics (Couldry and Curran 2003).

Internet has become a significant source for the rapidly increasing population of Chinese who are interested in receiving news and information online where social and political information is extensively disseminated (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). Online news dissemination and organisation usually revolves around online communities (Boczkowski, 2004). The interconnectedness of the Internet also lends itself to an arena of socially meaningful interactions arising in the constitution of a community (Baym, 2000). Online consumption of news derives from a network of online spaces, for example forums, blogs and news websites, of which provides the contents for public dissection and discussion (Tang and Sampson, 2012). As such, there is a relatively more holistic understanding of the issues and hence more
confidence with expressing of public resentment. The Internet is commonly perceived as a “public sphere” where encourages comparatively freedom of speech and thus leads to the development of the civil society in China (Yang, 2003).

Interconnected online communities have an advantage in expressing an united public opinion or criticism, usually on political issues incurring moral outrage, which is a critical part to play in shaping the dialogue of current affairs and hence subsequently political consequences (Zhao, 2008). This is because the Internet offers representations on a public space for groups usually marginalised by mainstream media, where they can form their own discussion spaces on the Internet. The convenience and accessibility of Internet as a public sphere also allow for more engagement with a wider audience and hence is an effective platform for them to air their public grievances and raise attention for various social issues. The weak, or the ordinary Chinese citizen in this context, achieve individual agency through autonomous actions and self-determination to negotiate the restrictions forcibly enforced on them. Urban youth is the primarily constitution of the participants in online public discussion of socio-political issues (Zhao, 2008). Disenchanted with CCP’s authoritarian rule and faced with similar sets of concerns with China’s underclasses with, for example corruption and abuse of power, they seek social justice by standing up for various social causes on online platforms (Zhao, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Although the marketization as well as the technological development of the media erodes CCP’s ability to control production and dissemination of information, the author argues that public online participation on political issues rather than being an absolute threat to their legitimacy, the emerging online sphere can unexpectedly help strengthen regime stability instead (Ogden, 2002). In their online public criticism, netizens act as whistle blowers against
government corruption and inconsistencies, of which some will garner enough traction to be warrant the attention of news media as well as CCP’s actions (for example investigation and punishments for errant authorities involved) leading to public appeasement (Zhou & Moy, 2007).

From this literature review, we can see it is the amalgamation of media marketization, the decentralisation of the Internet, as well as the emergence of an online civil society that offer a slightly more than a glimmer of democratic hope in such an authoritarian regime such as China, re-distributing some of the media power so deeply cherished by the party-state towards a relatively more inclusive society. The dialectic relationships between the government, media industry (both online and offline) as well as ordinary Chinese netizens illustrate the constant negotiation of agency despite the powerful commitment on part of the Party to suppress it. However, this research may be expanded to include how the government manipulate online public opinion with a bottom up rather than top down approach, for example the employment of the 50 Cents Army, and an insight into how does such acts translate in the overall online political climate.
References


