Is the Internet a Positive Force in the Development of Civil Society, a Public Sphere, and Democratization in China?

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The existing literature on Chinese communications/media is varied, although it has been marked by some key themes and interests. The Chinese case is complex because, unlike the former Soviet Union, which feared the communications revolution and severely restricted the availability of such new technological innovations as photocopy and fax machines for citizen use, Chinese leaders made a conscious and enlightened judgment that harnessing the benefits of the information revolution was absolutely crucial to the development and rise of China.[1] The leadership was confident enough that China's engagement with the outside world and the introduction of the latest technological tools into China could be controlled and managed successfully.

China's decision to participate actively in the information revolution has led to a number of questions that have dominated the literature, particularly among political and other social scientists. Some of these questions — such as the role of the Internet in promoting or suppressing democratic voices — have been commonly raised from the start, while others — such as China's likely success in its pursuit of "soft power" and cultural influence outside the country — are more recent, and are associated with the country's increasing confidence and importance in world affairs. The questions raised below are likely to remain important in the area of China Communication Studies.

One key theme relates to China's success in its management and control of information that appears in the mass media, including the print and broadcast media. However, as suggested above, arguably the most contested area in communications research has been the role of the Internet in state-society relations, and whether the Internet can be seen as a crucial step in the development of civil society, a public sphere, and the eventual democratization of China. Some observers, such as He Qinglian, have asserted that China has been almost completely successful in meeting "its goal of keeping citizens ignorant," and that such citizens are "isolated from one another and woefully lacking in organizational

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[1] In 1986, I took a delegation of university and college presidents (and their spouses) around China for the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. Given his experience in the Soviet Union, Loren Graham, an MIT professor who was perhaps the leading specialist on Soviet science in the U.S., was amazed when I showed him the rather widespread availability of photocopy machines for public use and the possibility of computer purchases in Chinese stores.

capacity and the ability to engage in political activity ... [and] are utterly incapable of opposing government corruption, no matter how blatant" (He, 2006, 2008).[2]

In contrast to such an extreme (and minority) view, many others, such as Guobin Yang, have been far more optimistic about the positive benefits of the Internet for future democratization. As Yang notes in his concluding chapter, "The most important development … is citizens' unofficial democracy. Online activism is a microcosm of China's new citizen activism, and it is one of its most vibrant currents. In this sense, online activism marks the expansion of grassroots, citizen democracy" (Yang, 2009, p. 223). For Yang, clearly, one important area for further research would be the mapping and development of this burgeoning unofficial democracy and citizen activism, as well as of state efforts to accommodate and channel it into "healthy" endeavors.

Others, such as Richard Baum, have suggested that Leninist regimes such as China, which attempt to resist the free flow of ideas and information, are pursuing self-defeating policies that threaten their long-term survival. He concludes that "it is not unreasonable to expect a more open and information-friendly China to emerge within a decade or so." Although he does not expect the "blind imitation" of Western-style institutions, he notes that whatever new institutions do arise will not be "Leninist" in nature, but "will have to bear the added weight of an increasingly vibrant, contentious, information-rich, and rights conscious civil society" (Baum, 2008).

Research Questions:

This topic has already received a great deal of attention in the literature, and various contributors to the debate have forcefully presented their positions. Arguably, if we can speak of a majority opinion, it would be that, despite the government's efforts at management and control, the Internet community, particularly the active blogging community, agrees on the importance of freedom of expression and sees such new technology (including, for example, SMS) as a force for democratization. They will continue to find ways to circumvent and subvert government restrictions.

One obvious example is the phenomenon of "spoofing" or "parody" (恶搞, or *egao*, or 山寨, or *shanzhai*), but even here, there is debate over whether this type of subversion of government attempts at

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[2] He has been especially critical of surveys done in China on attitudes toward the Internet and government control by such recognized experts as Guo Liang and Shi Tianjian. In noting that Guo's Markle Foundation survey, published in Chinese and English in 2003, found "first, Chinese citizens want the government to control the Internet; and second, there is not enough control," He suggested that "this conclusion is utterly absurd" (He, 2006, p. 44; Guo et al., 2003). One can certainly argue, however, that He has selectively interpreted and even distorted the findings of this important study to assert that "the job of scholars in the pay of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is to justify and legitimize government policies," as well as to question all survey research and public opinion polling conducted in China.

control, as in the "grass mud horse" (草泥马, or *cao ni ma*) scatological ridicule of the Green Dam software introduced to police all personal computers in China, or the deflation of intellectual pretentiousness, as in Hu Ge's mocking of Chen Kaige's film *The Promise* (无极, or *wuji*), offered something beyond amusement and an increase in T-shirt sales (Rosen, 2010). Does a protest over censorship, for example, lead either directly or indirectly to the creation of a future environment for a state-society relationship in which the government becomes more accountable to its constituents? In addition, would we expect alterations to the "fragile equilibrium" Baum describes to come from the periphery and fringe media, which are monitored less closely and are more subject to market forces, or from decisions made by the central Party-state seeking to ensure its survival? In short, what should we be looking for, and where should we be looking? Finally, comparative research on the emergence of the historical bourgeois public sphere in the West shows it to have been both more exclusive and more internally heterogeneous than it had earlier been imagined, leading Patricia Thornton to suggest that public spheres can develop in authoritarian societies, such as China, even under the censors' gaze (Thornton, 2010).

Part of the problem in addressing these questions is a lack of knowledge of attitudes in China, particularly since there remains at least some contention over the value of public opinion polling under controlled circumstances. However, recent survey data have suggested that the influence of Western culture is strong among educated Chinese youth, and that the American model of separation of powers has found resonance among university students who question whether the current Chinese political system is capable of dealing with such issues as official corruption (Rosen, 2010).[3] Such revealing surveys are seldom published openly or in complete form in the Chinese media. On the other hand, results that are so published on these issues have to be sanitized, with most of the controversial findings removed. A question for discussion at this workshop would be the strategy for designing survey research questionnaires with Chinese partners that would offer a better opportunity to examine the "true" beliefs of

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[3] For example, in one restricted circulation survey done by an institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, more than 94% of students of history who were queried acknowledged they had been influenced by Western culture, and even though more than 82% agreed that Western video products propagate Western political ideas and a Western lifestyle, fewer than 12% expressed a willingness to negate such products. Most directly, more than 51% identified themselves with American cultural concepts, while around 32% said, in effect, it was a "non-issue" (无所谓, or *wusuowei*). Only 17% said they did not identify with these concepts. The surveyors were surprised to discover that more than 61% identified with "liberalism" and found it to be a concept of universal moral significance, despite the fact, as the surveyors put it, that everyone knows that liberalism is part of Western political thought and the basis of the "democratic system" associated with Western capitalism. Other surveys, again not openly available, have found surprising support for certain American political institutions, despite criticisms of American foreign policy and the American media.

informants, and that would be acceptable to both the Chinese and Western sides. Having been engaged in this process on several projects, I am aware of a variety of difficulties.[4]

The Internet as a Contested Site Linking State and Society: Values and Legitimacy

While the role of the Internet in preventing or accelerating democratization has been one fruitful area of research — and observers can find ample reasons for optimism or pessimism, as Chinese controls wax and wane at different times — this is part of larger, but related, questions on the linkages between the state and society, and on the sources of political legitimacy for the Chinese state. One common approach would suggest that, in the aftermath of the military crackdown on the student movement in 1989, the political authorities shifted the grounds for their legitimacy to observable *performance*, encompassing both the material (e.g., raising the standard of living, continuing to expand the opportunities for China's youth to enter the middle class) and the spiritual (e.g., promoting patriotism and nationalism in the form of a "rising" China to world power status). The effect of these political decisions has contributed to the creation of a society marked by the secularization of youth, a society in which "participation" in politics has primarily been a private participation, through friends, family, and in anonymous Internet activities. In short, the political is associated with the personal, whether one considers the reasons for joining the Communist Party or the forums in which politics is discussed. For most youth, the Party-state and its sanctioned values are, in general, to be ignored whenever possible (Rosen, 2010).

In this formulation, to maintain legitimacy, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has to be interpreted less and less in ideological terms, as the state now confronts a young generation that *expects* deliverables from the government, whether in the form of expanding job opportunities; the timely handling of crisis situations, such as SARS or earthquake relief; a commitment to eliminate or at least greatly reduce official abuses; and the defense of Chinese interests against potential foreign enemies. Along with these rising expectations, the growth of the Internet and, more generally, the opening of China to the outside world have greatly increased both the availability of information and the rising public awareness among Chinese citizens, effectively eliminating the information monopoly of the state.

In this state-society contestation over appropriate modes of behavior, the state has been compelled to pay far more attention to public opinion, and one can find a number of examples of policy change — including, in some cases, policies not pursued or policies abandoned after a public outcry — that were necessitated by online activism. Susan Shirk has noted, for example, how Chinese officials feel under public pressure to take tough stands toward Japan and Taiwan because their reading of tabloids and online media suggest to them that "nationalism is sweeping the country" (Shirk, 2007, p. 85). If there is at least some agreement that the current state-society equilibrium is based on a compromise between an

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[4] As editor of a journal that translates material from Chinese into English, I have worked with a number of Chinese intellectuals to publish the full versions of their articles or surveys when Chinese publications have only published censored versions, including both "liberal" and "nationalist" intellectuals.

empowered public and an endangered leadership, there is less agreement on the nature of this compromise and the sustainability of this equilibrium. While some have suggested that the continuation of high rates of economic growth and the kind of deliverables noted above are essential if the state is to retain political legitimacy, others, particularly those who focus on cyber nationalism, have argued that this compromise between the ruling party and the ruled public is based less on economic factors, and more on the continuation of the state to stand firm on issues involving China's territorial sovereignty and national interests (Wu, 2007, p. 146).

Still others, for example Yuezhi Zhao in her recent book, point to the potential fragility of the neo-liberal model — and by extension, this compromise between the state and the beneficiaries of the reforms — and the vulnerability of China's new elite, suggesting at a minimum a continuing role for ideology and individual agency in the face of formidable structural forces that seek to prevent any substantive reorientation of China's developmental path in a direction more in keeping with socialist, humanistic, and true democratic values (Zhao, 2008, pp. 339–355).

Research Questions:

In addition to the questions noted above, it would be useful to examine the conditions under which various policy coalitions are formed, and under which government policies are altered or abandoned, focusing on the role of communications and media in this process. Some scholars, particularly Andrew Mertha, have already begun to address these questions in specific policy arenas, with intriguing results that suggest that the familiar emphasis on policy making at the central level and preoccupation with the likelihood of the expansion of "democratization" as generally understood in the West risks missing the reality of rapidly developing events on the ground, including the "pluralization of interests" that is occurring below, allowing far more players to participate in the policy implementation process at local levels. Of particular relevance for communication scholars in Mertha's analysis is the finding that media have played an important role in several of his case studies. Indeed, he notes that one reason for the success of NGOs in Chinese politics is that many of their officers and staff members were trained as journalists and editors, giving them especially close access to the media (Mertha, 2008).

"Bargaining" and "Negotiation" in Popular Culture

Another area of potentially fruitful research that addresses the increasingly complex relationship among politics, society, and culture is particularly relevant to many areas of popular culture in China, and it concerns lessons that can be derived from the interaction between state authorities and the entrepreneurial representatives of Chinese media and culture, as each side seeks to maximize its interests (Rosen, 2008). In the absence of the familiar state subsidies of the Maoist era, media and cultural units in post-socialist China are judged by their commercial success in a very crowded marketplace. State authorities and regulators fully understand this, even when the primary (political) values of the authorities are incongruent with the (commercial) values of the units they supervise. This has led to a system marked by *negotiation*, sometimes tacit and sometimes public, where cultural units may include their audience as a means of pressuring the authorities to exercise restraint in their control and regulation. The concern

with, and at times, the accommodation of, public opinion has created a situation in which the governing authorities may express an opinion (*biaotai*) against something, while still allowing the banned phenomenon, if it is popular enough, to exist despite the ban. There is a clear concern that policies that deviate too far from public expectations might affect the overriding value, which is promoting social stability. That is why you see the ebb and flow of policy, often with a lack of consistency.

Given space limitations, I can only briefly mention some relatively recent examples, including the rise and fall of the Chinese edition of *Rolling Stone*, introduced in March 2006 in a print run of 125,000; the fate of Li Yu's controversial film, *Lost in Beijing*, and the very public negotiation between the film's producer and Chinese film authorities when it was shown at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2007; and the co-optation of Ang Lee and his NC-17 masterpiece, *Lust, Caution*, which was given a Chinese theatrical release after Lee made some judicious cuts, despite a plot in which a collaborator with the Japanese escapes punishment, saved by a beautiful young revolutionary who is then executed, along with her fellow revolutionaries.[5] Perhaps the most obvious example concerns banned Hollywood films, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *The Departed,* which, despite the ban, are widely available for 6–7 *yuan* on the streets in pirated editions or free through downloading.[6] The government has made a decision, but it cannot prevent, nor does it necessarily want to prevent, the public from also making its own decision to watch the banned films.

Research Questions:

How can we map out this process of negotiation and bargaining that takes place not only in the area of popular culture, but in other areas as well, as in the recent decision to "postpone" the requirement that Green Dam software would have to be installed on all new computers? Who are the key players in these negotiations, and can we generate enough cases to offer conclusions that can be generalized across policy arenas? For example, how would we investigate the relative importance of foreign business interests and Chinese domestic interests as influences on the Green Dam decision? How are the multiple goals of the state — often contradictory, given substantial interministerial contention over control of policy and policy arenas — prioritized, and how do social forces take advantage of the lack of uniform state goals?[7]

The decision by China's political leadership to embrace the information revolution has served the country well, and it has contributed to the resilience of the Communist Party in maintaining its political

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[5] The *Lust, Caution* case is also associated with the issue of soft power. After Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* won the Academy Award for best foreign language film in 2001 as an entry from Taiwan, and brought in $128 million at the box office — more than twice as much revenue as any foreign language film marketed in the U.S. before or since — the Chinese film authorities have sought to bring him and his talent into the fold as a *Chinese* filmmaker.

[6] This is, of course, a complicated issue. In addition to providing the public with what it wants in terms of films, the pirated film and software "industries" provide employment for millions of people.

[7] Most recently, there has been a tug-of-war over the power to regulate *World of Warcraft*, among the most popular online games in China, between the General Administration of Press and Publication and the Ministry of Culture.

power. However, technological advancements growing out of this information revolution have also contributed to an increasingly complex relationship between state and society, and to the contentious issues that have marked this relationship, some of which have been noted above. As this relationship continues to evolve, it is clear that developments in communications/media will be one of the determining factors in this evolution.

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