

Chapter 18

An Agent for Change: The Internet is Setting New Agendas in China

Jiafei Yin

Central Michigan University, USA

ABSTRACT

China became the largest Internet user in the world with 420 million of its citizens connected to the new media by June 2010. This chapter investigates the social conditions and ways in which new communication technologies are transforming the politics, culture, and the society in China through analyses of uses of the Internet, differing roles played by the traditional and the new media, Internet regulations in the country, and cases catapulted to the national media spotlight by the online community, and through contrasts with the roles new communication technologies play in Western and African societies. The chapter also attempts to explore the implications of these transformations.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the Internet, as a new and instantaneous mass communication as well as interpersonal communication tool, is transforming the whole world, east or west, north or south, regardless of differences in political, economic or media systems. In well-developed democratic societies, it has threatened the survival of established mainstream media outlets by providing the public with a channel for accessing free media content, siphoning away streams of advertising

revenue, and giving rise to “citizen journalism”. In the Middle East, it has helped bring about democratic movements across the Arab world and beyond, toppling governments in Tunisia and Egypt, bringing on a raging civil war in Libya and mass demonstrations in Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, and even Saudi Arabia and Iran. Elsewhere in Africa, new communication technologies have become new tools of domination in reinforcing prevailing ideologies (Wachanga, 2011), as they tend to be in the hands of the ruling class or the privileged. In China, the adoption of the Internet, an open medium that defies total control, repre-

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sents a unique and fascinating experiment with a communist media system.

The Internet entered China in 1994, sixteen years after China opened up to the rest of the world following almost three decades of isolation from the west. It is the right medium at the right time for China. No other mass medium caught up in China as fast as the Internet has. Radio and television entered average Chinese homes decades after they became household items in the West. Despite breathtaking economic, social and cultural developments in China since the start of the reforms, China's political system – the communist system – has remained largely intact. China has, thus, become this odd combination of mostly *laissez-faire* private and capitalist economic system with one-party communist political system, which, according to predictions by Western scholars, will never work because of the incompatibilities of the two systems. Capitalism, at least in its early stages, is supposed to thrive on free competition predicated on the free flow of labor, capital, products, and information while communist governments closely monitor and heavily regulate such flows. In China after years of economic reforms, the opening up of the media sector seems to be the last intransigent frontier. Then came the Internet, the one unstoppable communication channel that has the capability of reaching millions instantaneously anywhere in the world. It may help negotiate the incompatibilities of the political and economic systems in China.

This is a fascinating experiment because it is unprecedented and because the outcome of such an experiment cannot be predicted. Already the impact of the Internet has caught many Party and government officials in China by surprise and prompted top state and Party leaders to log on to the virtual world to chat with ordinary citizens in order to maintain a government presence on the net. The Internet is bringing about revolutionary and irreversible changes to the news media in China and to the way the country is governed.

This chapter tries to answer research questions, including what kind of political, social and cultural impact the Internet is having in China, how the Internet brings about those changes, and what the implications of those changes in the Chinese society are in comparison to the impact of the Internet in Western societies. It will also provide a context for examining the controversies surrounding the regulations and control of the Internet in China.

The research in this chapter focuses on the analysis of nationally-known media cases, uses of the Internet, role of the new and old media, the laws and regulations concerning the Internet, and the factors that made the acceptance of the Internet in China possible. Statistical data for this study was drawn from the Statistical Reports on Internet Development in China, which are summaries of biannual national surveys of Internet use in the country by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), annual reports by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) on the Analysis of Internet Public Opinion in China, and 2009 China Journalism Yearbook.

BACKGROUND

Pre-Internet Days: Official Media Domination

Before the opening up of China in late 1970s, the media system in China was rather rigid, consisting only of official newspapers, television and radio stations. Crime was not news, and police was not a beat. There was very little variety in news coverage. Listening to the Voice of America, the U.S. government-funded radio, was a crime during the “cultural revolution.”

The opening up of China changed much of that once the control of the media was relaxed. Since then media outlets in China have proliferated and the media market has substantially expanded. Before the reforms, most of the cities in the country had only one Party paper, one official television

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