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THE INTERNET MEDIA IN CHINA

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In the past few decades, China's advancement in economic development has attracted researchers from all over the world and different fields to study the phenomenal rise of a new power in global politics (Démurger 2001). Along with the economic achievement, media in China have also enjoyed substantial growth during this time. The technological progress generates new forms and instruments from media industry. Channels to receive news and information have been significantly changed, from newspapers, to radio, to television, and now to news websites and social media on the internet. Media in China experienced a thorough structural transformation during the Chinese economic reform period (Zhang 2011). Some state-run media received aspects of marketization and commercialization in these neoliberal reforms. Securitization has become a major method for media outlets and companies to raise money. Private capital is allowed to hold part of the share in state-run media and official outlets. The government is no longer the only provider of mass media in the country but a powerful supervisor and controller over the information dissemination process (Zhao 2008). Individuals and small businesses are allowed to join the media market and open personal media outlets on different social media platforms. In addition, the equipment used to receive news and information from media outlets has been mobilized, evolving from stereo radio receivers, to televisions, to desktop computers, and now to mobile electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets.

One major change in the growth of the Chinese media market is the increasing popularity of and participation in the internet and internet-based media. The internet in China has continued to boom in recent years, as indicated by the constant growth in internet users and penetration of mobile internet (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). In the past decade, the number of internet users in China has substantially grown to over 900 million, more than all the G7 countries' populations combined. The internet penetration rate increased from 40% to 64%. Among these internet users, most of them now access the internet via mobile devices including smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc. The percentage of mobile internet users grew from 80% in 2013 to 99.3% in the most recent survey in March 2020. Simultaneously, the increasing penetration of mobile internet access facilitates the use of mobile devices as the major source for news and information. According the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2020) report that, by mid-2019, about 620 million internet users in China have installed at least one news app on their smartphones; 55% of these app users have subscribed to at least one media outlet or blogger to receive news and information regularly; and 60% of users
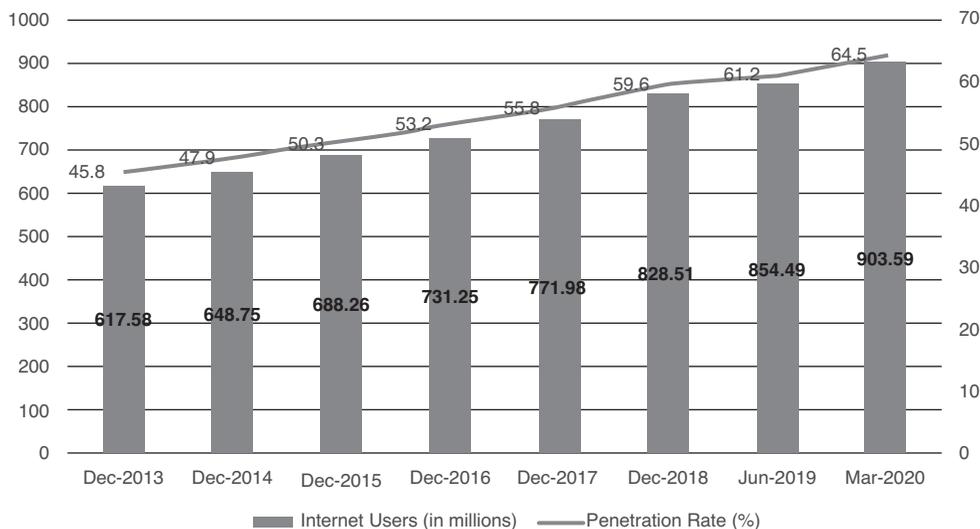
Figure 5.1 Number of internet users in China, December 2013 – March 2020
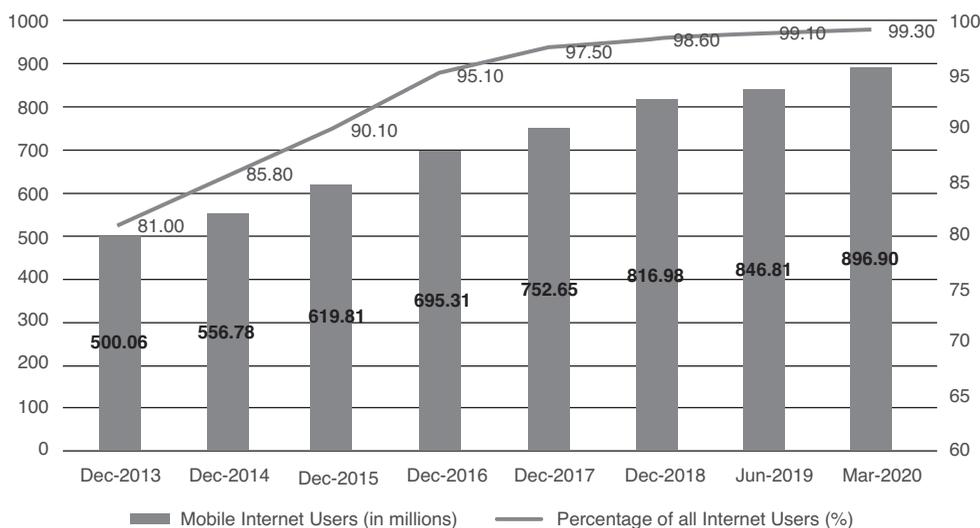
Figure 5.2 Number of mobile internet users in China, December 2013 – March 2020

normally use short breaks in working and daily life to search and review news and informa-tion via these apps.

This internet penetration and ubiquity of the mobile phone not only mark an outstanding feature of media in China in this new era, but also challenge the traditional governance of media, as media is overly controlled by the government in China. The next section provides background information about the media system in China and its development over the past few decades.

History and structure of the media system in the People's Republic of China

The development of media in Communist China can be divided into three stages in accordance with its socioeconomic progress: the fully state-owned and controlled era before the 1979 Open and Reform; limited marketization and commercialization after the 1980s; and the new media explosion during the internet age after 2000.

During the era of planned economy from 1949 to the late 1970s, like the economic activities in China, the entire media system was fully controlled and owned by the government. Media outlets were the de facto agents of the Communist government and functioned as the mouthpiece for government policies, regulations and notifications. Due to the underdeveloped economic situation then, newspapers, magazines and radio were the three major channels for people to receive information. As an important unit in the party, media was incorporated into different levels of government following a centrally controlled hierarchical pattern (Figure 5.3). Paper-based media were distributed in a rigorously designed quota system. Radio was scheduled by the order of the supervising government. Besides, the Xinhua News Agency served as the only news agency in the country and scripted official announcement and comments delivering the government's view on both domestic and international affairs.

From the late 1970s, restrictions on media marketization and commercialization were gradually loosened in China, led by the introduction of commercial advertising on paper-based media. Official media was permitted to transform from government agencies into either for-profit organizations or state-owned enterprises. This process sped up in the 1990s along with liberalization process of the Chinese economy (Zhao 2008b). Direct government funding to state-owned media declined and qualified private capital was permitted to invest
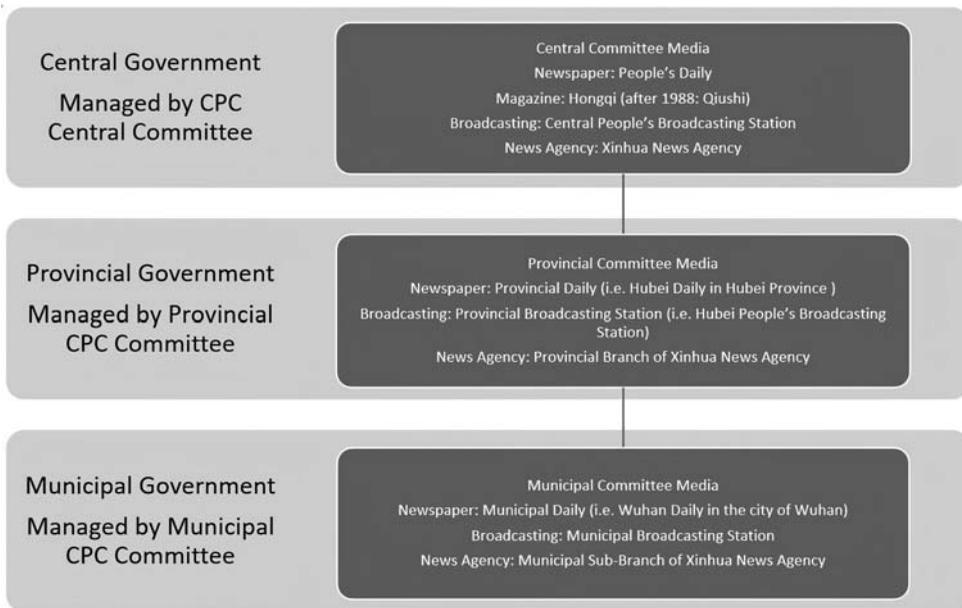

Figure 5.3 The hierarchical structure of state media in China

in the media sector. Newspaper and magazine agencies began to develop new titles and volumes for the market in a new commercialized distribution system. Retailing and subscription replaced the quota system. The general public also had greater access to news and information due to the diversification of the press market as media outlets were allowed to produce reports and comments themselves. At the same time, television became popular among Chinese families, and emerged as the most popular way to access news and information in China. News reports sourced from foreign news agencies were allowed under some permitted circumstances, and the Xinhua News Agency was no longer the only source of foreign events for Chinese people (Shirk 2010). However, the government still has strict regulations on investment in media and no foreign entities are allowed to hold any media in China.

Since 2000, the internet has begun to step into daily Chinese life. Cyberspace became the new battlefield of the competitive market of Chinese media. Internet companies such as Sina, Netease, Tencent and Sohu became new media giants as each developed a popular news web portal in China and enjoyed a noticeable share in the entire media market. As the internet has the advantage of timeliness and geographical coverage (Almeida & Lichbach 2003), these news web portals soon began to challenge the role of traditional media. State-owned media began to build up their own websites and tried to compete with these web portals.

Chinese media has undergone enormous changes as social media has emerged as an essential part of internet users' lives in China in recent years (Chiu et al. 2012). New information dissemination channels such as microblogging (Weibo developed by Sina) and social networking (WeChat Moment developed by Tencent) via social media apps soon attracted millions of users, as well as the attention of various media outlets in China. These new channels embedded within social media apps allow targeted pushing of news and information which enables users to see what they are most interested in (Jacobson et al. 2020). In addition, the capability to include multimedia attachments soon helped social media replace the role of traditional paper-based and telecommunications-based media and became the most popular way to receive news and information among Chinese internet users (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2020).

However, as an authoritarian regime, the Communist government holds hegemonic power monitoring all media activities in China (Lei 2019). A key department in the operation of the Communist Party is the Central Propaganda Committee, now named the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which was established in 1921. As part of the core ideological control over Chinese society, the CPC Publicity Department has the ultimate power to oversee all media activity in China and supervise information and content across different media formats, as it has designated units to monitor the various media operations in the country. In the 2018 national government reform, the duties and responsibilities of the Publicity Department were revised and it became the top censoring and supervising administration of all the media affairs in China. Currently, the Publicity Department has four units, as shown in Figure 5.4, controlling the press, film and television in China, and coorporates closely with the National Radio and Television Administration surveilling the traditional media.

Simultaneously as part of the 2018 government reform, a new agency, the Cyberspace Administration of China, has been established to monitor the increasingly expanded internet-based new media, which uses a set of tools including contextual filtering, content and activity censorship, and network firewalls to monitor internet activity in China. As all telecommunication companies and networks are state-owned in China, the government holds
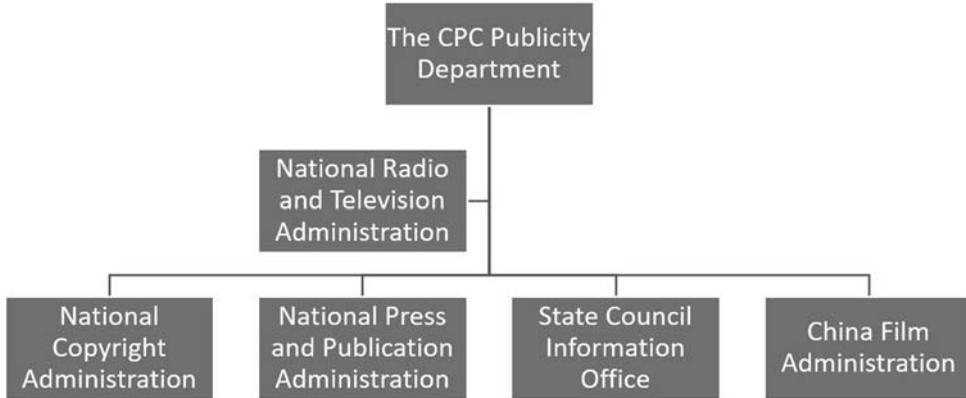
Figure 5.4 Governance structure of the CPC Publicity Department

the ultimate power to control the internet. This feature of internet telecommunications infrastructure in China facilitates the government's capability to control accessibility and monitor content for censorship purposes as much as possible, as the government has the ultimate power to inspect all the online traffic (Qiang 2019). As the internet emerges to be a more popular and influential channel for Chinese people to receive information, censorship and surveillance of online activities have intensified in recent years and blocklists of forbidden words and websites continue to grow (Hobbs & Roberts 2018). From an international per-spective, the freedom of the press, media and internet have been deteriorating in recent decades and there is still no sign of any loosening of the restriction or regulation of the internet and media (Reporters Without Borders 2019; Freedom House 2020).

New internet media and power in authoritarian society

Knowledge, media and power

Foucault's framework on the production of power and discourse (1990) outlines the rela-tionship between knowledge and power in a cyclical process: power reproduces knowledge and power is exercised through knowledge. In this model, the dissemination of knowledge acts as the expansion of power and those empowered are embedded with the capability to produce discourses in society. Therefore, the role of media is critical in practicing power and producing new knowledge as media disseminate information and knowledge to the public (Couldry 2010). In other words, media are the producer and conveyor of discourse in society. For the empowered group or social class in power, media would serve an important role in expressing their values and opinions to the public as the discourse developed by these empowered groups would be more likely to become enforced during this process.

Following the Foucaudian framework, media act as the key distributor of knowledge and hence are a crucial component in building the power structure in society. When media functions as an interpreter of information and knowledge to the public, media indeed are engaged with the power to influence the public's perception of events and subjects, which in return would affect public opinions and awareness on the reported events and subjects and ultimately help to shape the ideology of the society (Brookfield 1996; Cotterrell 1999). Media act as curators of the contemporary plural society by providing different interpretations

to the public in a country with less media regulation and restriction. In contrast, in a country with more media regulation and restriction, the spread of pluralistic values and thoughts would be difficult as media enjoy less freedom to express a value that is different from the mainstream, and face suppression from the empowered group upholding mainstream ideas.

New power structure of new internet media: A theoretical perspective

In a spatial perspective, traditional mass media were deeply embedded with geographical scales (Figure 5.5). The physical distribution and accessibility of newspapers and magazines in the traditional business model is highly correlated with geographical location and the coverage is limited (Zimmermann 2007). The transmission of radio and television signals is also subject to topological terrains. Therefore, for traditional media, such a coverage restraint has limited the accessibility of information for the public, and moreover, the outreach of power from the empowered social class. In the case of China, such limitations have affected the control and governance between central government and local residents in remote areas.

Compared to traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines and television, the internet media enjoy several advantages. First, internet media have incomparable timeliness in transmitting information as they makes instant breaking news a real-time experience in various ways, from text-only to live broadcasting (Risley 2000). Second, internet media, assisted by the penetration of mobile devices, have significantly enhanced our mobility in obtaining information (Andersson & Mantsinen 1980; Gohdes 2020). We can access news and information via mobile devices anywhere, unless there is no signal coverage. Third, the internet creates database of unprecedented size for users to search and obtain useful information and sources, empowering the grassroot class with abundant materials for discourse-making. Thus, internet media shall challenge the tradition power relation and knowledge production as the internet disseminates the originally concentrated media power to individuals. The timeliness and coverage have reached unprecedent levels of convenience for the empowered to disseminate the discourse and for the masses to receive the information. With improved infrastructure, particularly the optical fiber network and telecommunication-based internet access, the increasing penetration of the internet marks an increasing influence of internet media, as well as an elevated capability to dominate knowledge and power structures in society.

Figure 5.5 A comparison across tradition media

As social media allow individuals to report news and information on the internet, power structures in society would be modified as a new relationship between the government and the general public arises. Individuals can now establish social media channels to express personal opinions. Therefore, the new internet media would promote functions of providing transparent information, facilitate effective communication and encourage public participation in political affairs, all of which could benefit China's development towards a civil society.

First, new participants enter the media sector in China via the internet and information can be produced not only from state-run or state-monitored professional media outlets, but also independent grassroots social media accounts. One new rising source of power in this process is celebrity accounts, or cewebrities (social media celebrities, originated from WeMedia + Celebrity, or Web celebrity, "wang hong" in Chinese) (Stokes & Price 2017). These are the news and information media accounts edited by independent reporters and commentators that have a noticeable number of subscribers or followers, hence have the capability to influence certain people's view and ideology. In the meantime, the state-owned media and other government outlets have also joined the social media platforms and broadcast official voices in this new channel as they try to retain their influence with the public. Theoretically, the extended participation in media would provide a new direct channel to receive information from the government and an alternative method to collect public opinions on social events from the comments and messages. The original single source power in controlling information and knowledge is challenged by the introduction of these new participants.

Second, the new internet media creates a new power structure that challenges the government to alter its original policy on media issues. From a progressive perspective, the new media enables users to query the government directly, which endows individuals in the public with the potential to produce discourses and influence each other's opinion. In return, this process would undermine government power in society and put government behaviors under the supervision of these independent media subscribers and viewers as the public tends to have more negotiating power in contesting with the government (Saeed 2009). Over time, the unbalanced pattern of power in an authoritarian society would be adjusted and the general public would have the opportunity to be empowered and enabled for the improvement and enhancement of civil rights.

However, the introduction of new media and new discourse-makers in cyberspace might not be a realm of pro-democratic reform or movement. Instead, it could also create another enclosed social space due to the control and censorship exercised by the authoritarian government, and erode the freedom enjoyed by the public (Stoycheff et al. 2020). The government could also use new media and censorship tricks to eliminate different opinions and maintain its authority with existing administrative power. Similar to the social disorder during the Cultural Revolution under Mao's regime, new internet media, with its unprecedent penetration power among the public, could be used as a weapon to attack unfavorable opinions and discourses in the name of patriotism, nationalism and populism. If such a scenario happened, Chinese society would be in a dangerous situation with highly polarized groups and intensified class conflicts.

Another possibility is that the pluralization of thoughts and ideologies sparkled by new internet media and mass participation could generate new incentives for an authoritarian regime to revise its censorship and surveillance policy, which would lead to further drawing back of media control, and other social freedoms (Dick 2012). Hypothetically, an authoritarian government could make the use of the internet and its control over media and technology companies to create a tailored cyberspace for citizens: unfavorable information and

news could easily be removed; people with different opinions could be tracked, monitored and suppressed; cewebrities could be ordered to post designated materials and content to influence fans and followers which would uniformize the voice, opinion and comment online.

Through the build-up of a power-relation framework of media in society, it is true that the new technology could be a double-edged sword in modifying existing social structures. In a progressive environment, new internet media and increasing numbers of participants in discourse and information production could benefit the society by providing multi-dimensional approaches to interpreting events and exchanging thoughts and ideas. However, in a suppressive society with less democratic rights, new media and mass participation can be manipulated by the government and lead to an Orwellian dystopia, which every civil society should avoid (Richard 2012).

New internet media in China

Similar to the market structure of e-commerce in China, the Chinese internet media market is also highly polarized and controlled by a few giant platforms (Miao 2020), including WeChat, the most popular social media platform and SMS application owned by Tencent; Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of Twitter owned by the gateway website Sina; Toutiao, an open platform of news and information content owned by ByteDance; Xigua Video, Byte-Dance's video-sharing platform; and Douyin, the Chinese version of Tiktok also developed by ByteDance. According to recent market research, the three companies—Tencent, Sina Weibo, and ByteDance—have occupied over 90% of the share of the entire Chinese internet media market (Forward Business Info 2019). Among these, WeChat, as the most popular social media and SMS app in China, has occupied the largest share of the media market, and generated two-thirds of all profits in Chinese internet media. And Weibo, the microblogging platform introduced by Sina in 2009, is the second most popular platform for internet media. By the end of 2018, WeChat and Weibo together occupied 80% of the total number of view counts of all Chinese internet media.

WeChat-based social media platform Moments adopted a restricted access feature for users. No access will be granted to the shared content until a user is verified and added as a friend. Such security and privacy features soon made it a popular platform to share information among a more intimate group of people, which helped to strengthen small but dynamic circle cultures among groups sharing some similarities (Lucero 2017). Theoretically, this increased level of intimacy helps to create a comfortable zone for users to share and comment on online materials and serves as a unique feature of the WeChat platform, that Moments is a relatively safe space to share more sensitive and private views and opinions.

Started in 2013, Moments soon experienced an explosive growth in popularity. Differing from other public platforms, the semi-private Moments allows the new media participant to write much more detailed opinions with more personal comments (Kietzmann et al. 2012). The stickiness does not only imply a consistent number of subscribers and viewers of a new media, but also a consistent political view or positionality on news and information. In another words, as each Moments user establishes a personal intimate network of reliable friends and acquaintances, all users in this group tend to have more commonalities in social and political views. When one user subscribes to a new media on Moments and share the article to their friends, members in this circle tend to share the article and new media further when they agree with the article. In return, writers and commentators tend to retain their fans and followers by providing analysis and comments in the same way. The subscriber and

fan group of each new media account indeed have established a semi-closed knowledge and fandom sphere (Highfield et al. 2013). Therefore, when looking into statistics on WeChat new media accounts, it shows that subscribers have a higher level of stickiness to the subscription and the subscribers. Table 5.1 shows the most recent statistics on top WeChat new media accounts.

In contrast, considered as the Chinese counterpart of Twitter, Weibo is an open-access platform for sharing bite size microblog information. Hence users have access to an enormous range of content providers and are able to subscribe to as many materials as they like. Thus,

Table 5.1 Top news and information accounts on the WeChat platform (June 2020)

Media name	No. of active subscribers	Average view count	Description
	(in millions)	(per article)	
Zhanhao (占豪 zhanhao668)	17.04	Over 100,000	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
Webmaster Feng's Home (冯站长之家 Fgzadmin)	14.99	Over 100,000	Briefer of news from official sources
Yuanfang Qingmu (远方青木 YFqingmu)	6.17	Over 100,000	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
Ping's Talk Today (今日平说 zg5201949)	11.98	98,761	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
Youyou Luming (呦呦鹿鸣 youyouluming99)	5.41	98,553	Business and economic commentator
Shoulouchu (兽楼处 ishoulc)	4.95	Over 100,000	Real estate market analyst
Lukewen's Studio (卢克文工作室 lukewen1982)	7.39	Over 100,000	International politics commentator
China Railway 12306 (铁路 12306 CRTT12306)	4.32	Over 100,000	Online rail ticket service
Xueyin (血饮 caojianming1989)	7.04	Over 100,000	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
China Super Dad (超级学爸 chinasuperdad)	3.65	88,601	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
Zhengshitang (政事堂 zhengshitang2019)	2.74	Over 100,000	Political commentator
Ning Nanshan (宁南山 ningnanshan2017)	3.22	Over 100,000	Business and economic analyst
Hu Xijin's View (胡锡进观察 huxijinguancha)	3.91	98,746	Semi-official nationalist political commentator
Housha (后沙 HSYGLGJ)	3.26	78,785	Patriotic nationalist political commentator
North American College Daily (北美留学生日报 collegedaily)	2.14	98,595	Patriotic news info for overseas Chinese students
Overall average	**6.55**	**N/A**	

Source: Xigua Data (Retrieved http://data.xiguaji.com)

Weibo is a one-directional information acquisition platform, rather than a place to express personal and sensational opinions (Gao et al. 2012). Table 5.2 shows the most recent statistics on numbers of active subscribers for top Weibo information and news accounts, which ranges from politics to entertainment and lifestyle fashions. Most of them record a much larger subscriber number than media on WeChat.

The statistics on the two platforms illustrate two critical trends in current Chinese society. First, internet media is closely connected to the political life in China, and patriotism seems

Table 5.2 Top news and information accounts on the Weibo platform (June 2020)

Media name	No. of active subscribers	Average no. of likes	Description
	(in millions)	(per article in thousands)	
People's Daily 人民日报	118.65	26.2	Official CPC Newspaper
CCTV News 央视新闻	110.98	24.6	Official Chinese Television
Hu Xijin 胡锡进	23.02	17.0	Chief Editor of nationalist *Global Times*
I am Jerry Kowal 我是郭杰瑞	2.69	34.8	American blogger living in China
Panda Guardian 熊猫守护者	17.99	5.02	Wildlife conservation NGO
Weibo Mission 微博任务	73.34	1.35	News and promotions on the Weibo platform
Breaking News 头条新闻	79.20	11.1	News and information managed by Weibo's parent company Sina
Call Me "Mr. Hot" 请叫我热门君	18.14	3.09	Independent news and information blogger
Korea Me2Day 韩国me2day	26.51	14.8	Independent K-pop and fandom blogger
JD.com 京东	4.48	6.90	Official account of the e-commerce giant JD.com
Headline Qiwen 头条奇闻网	18.57	2.77	Official account of the news website Qi520W
Global Headline 头条全球	18.84	2.76	Entertainment head-line news
Fashion Life Headline 时尚生活头条榜	13.29	3.16	High-end life and fashion information
Call Me "Mr. News" 请叫我新闻君	14.85	3.12	Independent news and information blogger
Shanghai Fashion Headline 上海时尚生活头条	11.76	2.96	High-end life and fashion information
Overall average	**36.82**	**10.64**	

Source: Xigua Data (Retrieved http://data.xiguaji.com)

to be the dominant ideology among internet media users: seven out of the top 15 Wechat media, totaling more than 50 subscriptions, claim themselves patriotic reporters on political issues. Among Weibo media, all top three are either official accounts of state-run media or individuals with an official background. Political information remains the most popular content on the internet. And the state still plays a significant role in internet media. Second, when tracking the content published by these accounts on Moments, it shows that most of these "patriotic" news commentators or writers are also igniting hatred towards Western countries and democratic ideologies, which signals an increasing nationalism and xenophobia in China at this stage, given the contemporary conflict between China and Western countries over several issues.

Media in China have long been criticized for the lack of basic freedom of the press and speech. The government has adopted complex censoring and filtering systems for both traditional and internet media, claiming the necessity of these measures in order to prevent "the dissemination of misinformation and news" and preserve a "positive power" for the society to maintain the social stability. However, the excessive control of information and news on all media has triggered several social problems across the country and created information asymmetry for media users in China, as negative information from oversea media outlets would have been automatically removed. International information and news on the Chinese media have been vastly censored and sorted by the government in order to depict a favorable image of the Communist Party among the public, and this deliberately constructed information asymmetry creates a widening gap of information and perception between Chinese ideas and Western ideology. Western liberal democratic systems are labelled as the puppets of capitalism and a disaster in managing social development (Boix & Svolik 2013). Only approved information can be disseminated freely by internet media. For example, during the global COVID-19 crisis, media in China had extensively spread the "Western failure" to contain the virus and used the pandemic in Europe and the US as a foil to illustrate the success of the Chinese way of controlling the disease, as well as the advantage of the authoritarian decision-making process by the CPC government. At the same time. Information and news in China about COVID-19 have been strictly controlled and only government approved information can be published across different platforms. According to CitizenLab (2020), a research cohort on the Chinese internet and social media from the University of Toronto, the Chinese government promptly expanded its blocklist of forbidden words in February 2020 and negative information about the government's COVID-19 response tended to be deleted.

The Wuhan-based[1] Chinese writer Fang Fang and her Wuhan Diary is another good example showing government intervention in new internet media. During the Wuhan lockdown between January 25 and March 25, as an established writer with more than 4 million subscribers to her Weibo account, Fang Fang posted her diary about the life in Wuhan during the lockdown period to Weibo. Her diary was based on both witnessed fact and learned information from others about the situation in Wuhan. Some diaries with unconfirmed information of the disease were censored and deleted from Weibo at the discretion of the internet censorship agency. Her Weibo account was once withheld and then reinstated early in February after she posted the first few chapters online. Her diary was appraised by both Chinese and foreign readers due to its informative and spiritual value. On March 30, Hu Xijin published a comment on his *Global Times* account positively confirming the value of Fang Fang's diary, as it reflected the solidarity and love among Wuhan residents. On April 8, the US press HarperCollins translated and published all of her 60 diaries during the lockdown period, which soon ignited a fierce wave of criticism of Fang Fang in China,

led by several nationalist cewebrities. For example, Hu Xijin soon made a U-turn from his previous view by claiming Fang Fang's work deteriorates the image of China and the Chinese people as it records the dark side of Wuhan during the lockdown and contains unconfirmed stories and information. Later, in mid-April, Wuhan local news reported that Fang Fang had experienced cyber bullying from nationalist internet users and received death threats in her daily life.

The case of Fang Fang does echo several characteristics of new internet media in China. First, it is a new channel for individuals to express personal ideas and thoughts. Therefore, people would be able to access alternative information and viewpoints differing from official statements and notifications by the state-run media. However, such civil rights are merely accessible to the public in theory as the censorship system would delete unfavorable information and messages without anyone's consent. Second, the cyber ideology could be easily manipulated when needed as both Chinese government and the pro-government media can clean out different opinions quickly by various cyber bullying tricks such as verbally insulting and abusing. Third, state-run internet media have attempted to gain full control over online speeches and posts. Instead of providing a less restricted platform for the public to exchange thoughts and ideas, the internet media platforms are becoming bustling fields for censorship and information filtering.

Concluding notes

The internet and social media have significantly changed communication and information for most Chinese people. In cyberspace, new internet media do benefit Chinese society in many aspects such as coverage of information, convenience of acquisition, channel of communication and interaction and networking. Several pieces of research show that the new internet media provides new channels to solve various social problems such as property rights conflicts (Huang & Sun 2014), complaints about some government agencies (Nip & Fu 2016), environmental concerns about air pollution (Jiang et al. 2015), etc. However, the internet in China is still heavily controlled and censored by the government. Signals of tightening media control can be spotted in party policies and government regulations. Posts by new internet media writers are still in danger of being removed, withheld or deleted if posted information is considered unfavorable by government standards. At the same time, a wave of increasing pro-Communist and pro-government media is blowing into this new space of knowledge and information, marking a leftward turn towards nationalism and patriotism in China, which could lead the country on a unique ideological pathway that is totally different from the Western liberal ideal and might shed the prospect of democratic reform and human rights improvement in the country.

Note

1 The first COVID-19 outbreak was recorded in Wuhan, China.

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