Part III

The internet, public sphere
and media culture
Politics and social media in China
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Introduction

In December 2012, the Chinese government toughened its restrictions on social media by issuing new rules that required internet users to provide their real names to online service providers, while assigning internet companies greater responsibility for policing controversial content (Bradsher 2012). The issue of attaching real names to online posts had drawn the government’s attention due to the growing popularity of Twitter-like blogs and other internet services that allow Chinese online users to circumvent the state-sponsored flow of information in China’s traditional media. The move was the latest in the ongoing battle between state censorship of the internet and attempts at political reform through social media that has drawn much attention from the popular and academic presses. However, the degree to which that struggle has resulted in social media’s tangible effects on increased political engagement in China is not yet apparent.

In the literature on the political effects of the internet in China, several studies have focused on censorship and the potential of social media to contribute to political engagement (Jiang 2010a; Lagerkvist 2006; Leibold 2011: 1023–41; MacKinnon 2008 and 2009). However, many of these analyses have been anecdotal or case-based, and have not resulted in a clear portrait of internet use in China and its potential for political participation.

As Leibold (2011: 1023–41) points out, optimistic conclusions about the internet’s reformatory role in China are premature and possibly inaccurate. Moreover, the focus on online censorship and digital activism in China has limited scholarly analysis of the important social and cultural factors that may contribute to changes in Chinese society. While scholars have rightly pointed out the potential of digital media for circumventing the government’s strategies of information control and prior restraint, there is little empirical evidence that points to the internet’s contribution to systemic change. Claims that social media are altering the balance of power between the Chinese government and the public often are unsupported or tempered as a tentative step toward the development of a healthier public sphere (Esarey and Xiao 2008: 752–72; Xiao 2004).

In fact, what little empirical evidence exists indicates that Chinese online and social media ecologies may have produced the same power-privileged, niche-driven, entertainment-oriented internet culture seen in many other societies (Leibold 2011: 1023–41). Chinese internet users
are mostly apathetic about politics, and some studies indicate that the few who contribute are generally motivated by the opportunity to share personal opinions rather than more substantive forms of political engagement (Liang and Lu 2010: 103–20). As a result, the same incivility and superficial commentaries so prevalent in the social media of many western nations also have been found in China—a characteristic that some scholars fear will hinder social media’s broader political engagement appeal (Guo 2007). While most scholars agree that new forms of political participation in China, such as exchanging information and political views through social media, probably have had a net positive result, they have not yet been chronicled in the academic literature.

In this chapter we will attempt to take stock of the current state of the internet in China by analysing what digital media are available, how they are used within China’s unique political and social environment, and what effects they might have on political engagement among ordinary Chinese. In doing so, we will try to rely on as much empirical evidence as possible, even though we realise that this is a fairly new and unexplored topic among China’s scholars. We will start our discussion with a description of internet access in China, followed by a more detailed look at the availability and use of social media and blogging. We will then discuss the growing significance of online video in China’s public sphere and how this medium has become an important tool for undermining the government’s efforts at controlling social media. Finally, we will review the current literature on the potential link between social media and political engagement in China. Because the digital landscape in China is shifting constantly and reliable data are often difficult to obtain, we would like to remind the reader that everything that is being discussed here might be quickly outdated by new developments. However, many of the trends in China’s digital media mentioned here have been observed during the past decade or so, which leaves us to hope that they remain significant in the foreseeable future.

**Internet access**

In the quarter-century since the first email transmission from China in 1987, the internet has developed and expanded exponentially in this vast nation (Qiu 2003). Internet access in China has grown from only a few thousand users in the mid-1990s to 298 million in 2008—the year it surpassed the United States for the most internet users in the world. By the end of 2013, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reported 618 million Chinese internet users, representing 45.8 per cent of China’s total population (CNNIC 1998, 2013 and 2014).

The average internet user in China spends about 25 hours per week online and is most likely to be an urban male (56.0 per cent) in his teens (24.1 per cent) or twenties (31.2 per cent). A significant number of Chinese online users also are found among those between 30 and 39 years old (23.9 per cent), while those older than 40 represent a relatively small group (19.1 per cent). However, with internet penetration approaching nearly half of China’s population, the demographics of internet users have begun to adopt a more egalitarian distribution. Less educated groups, such as middle school (36.0 per cent) and high school (31.2 per cent) graduates, now represent a larger share of all internet users than those with at least some college-level education (20.9 per cent). In addition, online users are now relatively evenly distributed among high- and low-income segments in China (CNNIC 2014).

Despite this rapid growth and a more diverse online audience, a significant urban–rural digital divide still characterises internet use in China. Almost three-fourths (71.4 per cent) of Chinese online internet users are urban dwellers compared with about one-fourth (28.6 per cent) who are rural residents. Moreover, this gap has widened since 2007 (Freedom House 2012). Geographically, the eastern, coastal provinces demonstrate a much higher rate of internet use
than the less economically developed central and western regions of China. Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong are the top three provincial districts for internet resources.

Research on what exactly Chinese ‘netizens’ (wang min) do on the internet is limited. One of the few studies that has tried to provide empirical evidence for the online activities of Chinese internet users was conducted by Pan and his colleagues in Shanghai (Pan et al. 2011: 116–32). Based on a quota sample of 2,910 residents who were interviewed in 2009, the authors analysed ‘how internet use behaviour is embedded with the structural properties of China’s social stratification system’ (Pan 2011: 111). As expected, their findings revealed fairly significant inequality in access and use of the internet among Chinese netizens. Both the likelihood of internet adoption and frequency of using it upon adoption were significantly greater among younger men with higher levels of education, income and occupations with higher levels of social prestige. Internet users also were more likely to read newspapers and magazines more regularly. Based on their findings, the authors ‘caution against drawing systemic inferences on internet’s impact in China without taking into account of social differentiation in terms of socio-economic status, age, gender, possession of media resources, and other basic social grouping characteristics’ (Pan 2011: 111).

For Chinese users who have access, various other barriers to accessing news and information online remain. The government’s strategy of content control consists mainly of automated technical filters, self-censorship by service providers and proactive government censorship (Freedom House 2012). China’s technical filtering, sometimes called the ‘Great Firewall’, includes wholesale blocking of domain names, but also incorporates approaches such as the filtering of individual internet pages within otherwise approved sites. This technique renders a subtle form of censorship, or ‘web throttling’, which slows the loading of data to render some services essentially useless (Freedom House 2012). These controls reinforce one another and have become increasingly ubiquitous and advanced as the internet has spread and more citizens have gone online. However, a growing number of Chinese internet users try to circumvent censorship and filtering controls by using either a virtual private network (VPN), alternate terms or homonyms to replace sensitive words, multiple accounts on hosting sites or peer-to-peer networks (Freedom House 2012).

Mobile internet

While most Chinese access the internet from home or work, a relatively new trend in China is mobile online access. According to a report of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, there were 1.1 billion mobile phone users in China by March 2013. That figure represents 84.9 per cent of China’s population, making it the country with the most mobile phone users worldwide (MyDrivers 2013). Because many of these phones have basic internet capabilities, mobile phones have become the most popular way to access the internet in China, with about 500 million people doing so regularly (CNNIC 2014).

While phone calls remain an important form of communication in China, a growing number of mobile phone users communicate primarily via short message service (SMS). In March 2013, 74.6 billion text messages were sent over the network of China Mobile, the nation’s largest telecom carrier, with an average of 2.1 messages per phone each day. The number of text messages sent each day usually surge during holidays in China, especially during the traditional Spring Festival, when millions of people text greetings to family and friends. According to official estimates, Chinese revellers sent more than 30 billion text messages during the 2012 Spring Festival (China Daily 2012).
The fact that so many Chinese now have access to text messaging has prompted some scholars to argue that this form of digital communication could become a powerful tool for democracy in China. He (2008: 182–90), for example, argues that SMS has become a ‘fifth’ media channel in China that allows users to participate in a growing ‘nonofficial discourse universe’ which, in turn, could make them politically more engaged. His analysis of the political power of text messages concludes that ‘although much of the content through SMS is not directly subversive with regard to the political structure, it is subversive culturally and ideologically in that it sustains a diverse discourse’ that could undermine the control of the Chinese government (p. 188). However, the evidence for such political consequences of SMS discourse in China remains to be tested empirically.

As internet access through mobile phones has grown in popularity, the boom of internet cafés in China has subsided. As recently as 2007, internet cafés were the second most popular access point for Chinese internet users, with more than one-third (37.2 per cent) of them going online at cybercafés. Five years later, only about one-quarter (25.8 per cent) relied on internet cafés for online access (CNNIC 2007 and 2012). The importance of internet cafés in China has been reduced mostly by increasingly tight government controls. Starting in 2010, internet café users across China were required to provide proof of identification before they were allowed entry (Radio Free Asia 2010). In January 2011, the Vice Minister of Culture announced that all sole-proprietor cybercafés would be replaced by chains within the next five years, a move that observers considered a means to increase the efficiency of government surveillance and censorship (Freedom House 2011).

Social media

In his landmark study, *The Power of the Internet in China*, Guobin Yang (2009) argues that the internet has fostered the ‘emergence of a citizen’s discourse space’ in China. ‘Nowhere else’, says Yang, ‘do Chinese citizens participate more actively and directly in communication about public affairs. Nowhere else are so many social issues brought into public discussion on a daily basis’ (p. 217). Yang also argues that the internet has created Chinese netizens who are ‘fearless, informed, impassioned, and not easily deceived’ (p. 217).

While the internet has allowed Chinese citizens to access more and better information with just a few clicks, the manner and speed with which people can organise into active political groups through social media has drawn special concern from the government (Zhang and Shaw 2012). What worries officials most is the fundamentally interactive character of social media that enables citizens to discuss public affairs issues with very limited opportunities for the state to control what is being said and who is participating in the discussion.

It is therefore no surprise that social media are subject to special government attention in China. Access to foreign social media sites, such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter has been blocked fairly consistently since 2009 (Branigan 2010). To counteract demand for such foreign services, the Chinese government has supported the development of a wide range of alternative, Chinese-language services that are run on domestic servers and therefore are under the direct control of the government (R. Martin 2011).

However, unlike western-based social media services that are dominated by Facebook and Twitter, China has several networks that appeal to specific user groups. Most of these services are accessed via mobile phones and thus popular even among those who cannot afford computers. The largest and oldest social networking site in China is Qzone, which started as an extension of Tencent’s ubiquitous instant message service QQ Messenger. Qzone reached an astonishing 625 million monthly users in 2013 by targeting teens and rural users throughout
the country who access the service mostly via QQ (Tencent.com 2014). Tencent also owns the mobile text and voice messaging service Weixin (known as WeChat internationally), which has become China’s second most popular social network with more than 355 million monthly users in 2013 (Tencent.com 2014).

The popular social networking service Renren, which attracts about 100 million monthly users (Savitz 2012), appeals mostly to college students and features services that are very similar to Facebook with user profiles, friendships, and applications for entertainment and games (Gustin 2011). Kaixin001.com, with 130 million registered users, is a close rival of Renren but targets mostly white-collar workers in China’s larger cities (kaixin001.com 2014). Other social networking services, such as 51.com and Douban, are popular with smaller online communities throughout China, but also have between 100 and 200 million registered users each (Savitz 2012).

As Wallis (2011: 406–36) notes, social media in China have become ‘an active realm for public discussion, information dissemination, and mobilisation in ways that are both sanctioned and discouraged by the government’ (p. 419). However, Chinese social media services are subject to the same content controls as other websites registered in the country. Automated keyword filters, government reminders for self-censorship consideration and direct control of content by government agents are commonly used to monitor social media in China (Freedom House 2012). A 2011 content analysis of about 1,400 different Chinese social media services, including blogs and bulletin board systems, estimated that 13.0 per cent of posts were deleted by censors, many in the first 24 hours (King et al. 2012: 1–18). Contrary to expectations, posts with negative criticism of the government and its policies were not more likely to be censored; instead, the researchers found that the censorship programme was aimed at curtailing collective action through the silencing of comments that contribute toward social mobilisation, regardless of content.

Blogging

Chinese bloggers have been celebrated by scholars and journalists alike as fearless heroes who have ousted corrupt officials, exposed political scandals, undermined state control and generated greater political transparency (Gao and Martin-Kratzer 2011: 69–83; Yang 2009; Zhou 2009: 1003–22). However, relatively few studies have investigated the democratic potential of political blogs (Zhou 2009: 1003–22). Instead, most claims about the political impact of blogs in China are based on anecdotes, speculation and a few exceptional cases.

What dominate are content analyses that assume rather than empirically test political power. A good example of such studies would be Zhou’s (2009: 1003–22) qualitative content analysis of 316 blog posts related to the controversial dismissal of Shanghai Communist Party chief Chen Liangyu in 2006. Despite the fact that only about one in ten posts were critical of the government’s actions, Zhou concluded that this criticism is ‘very meaningful to Chinese people, considering the heavy censorship imposed on mainstream news media’ (p. 1016). However, she also noted that ‘the main political value of blogging in China is not to be found in politician’s presentations, but in the network discussions on political events and public issues involving millions of bloggers, which must be attributed to the trend of Chinese bloggers becoming popularised and diversified’ (p. 1008).

Esarey and Xiao’s (2008: 752–72) content analysis of popular political blogs in China is more sceptical in tone, but also assumes rather than tests the political power of blogs. While the authors identified ‘satirical, implicit, or otherwise guarded critiques of the party-state’ in the analysed blog posts published in 2006, they concluded that political blogs mostly influence the political process in China by creating dissent and undermining popular belief in the censored official
media and by allowing citizens to gradually develop strategies for challenging the official discourse without being subjected to repression.

A similar study by Esarey and Xiao (2011: 298–319) used content analysis to compare information available in nine daily newspapers and blogs, and found that blogs included almost no national or local propaganda, significantly more criticism and much more discussion of pluralism than the state-run print media. They concluded that financial independence, complete lack of editorial oversight and the low cost of restarting blogs that have been shut down by the authorities allow bloggers to include more controversial content than traditional media. For example, in 2011, more than 14,000 blog posts included the terms ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘rights’, and more than 19,000 posts included ‘democracy’ and ‘political reform’.

Much of the optimism surrounding blogging in China is, of course, based on the enormous number of participants. According to estimates by CNNIC (2014), by the end of 2012, there were 437 million bloggers in China, accounting for about 70.7 per cent of all internet users. It is important to note, though, that the majority of bloggers in China are young people who write about their daily lives (MacKinnon 2008: 31–46). The most popular blogs, of course, are those run by celebrities and successful entrepreneurs (Nie and Li 2006: 746–51; Wallis 2011: 406–36).

Arguably the most prominent public affairs blogger in China is the author and professional rally driver, Han Han. The 31-year-old’s aggressive personal style, which he uses in his books, on his blogs and in real life, has helped him accumulate more than 597 million hits on his blog as of April 2014 – more than any other personal blog in China and possibly the world (Hille 2010). Most of his fans come from China’s post-1980s generation, which is often characterised by its enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, consumerism and access to digital media. The success of his blog can be partly explained by the wide range of topics it focuses on, including current affairs, politics, education, art and entertainment. Many of his posts also critically discuss political issues in China and, at times, even accused Communist party officials of corruption and cronyism.

Another prominent political blogger is the 44-year-old novelist and social critic Li Chengpeng. His blog, which regularly criticises the Chinese government for mishandling important public affairs issues, has received more than 324 million hits as of April 2014. Li became a celebrity blogger in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which he witnessed first-hand in Chengdu. Millions of people read his story about a group of elementary school teachers guiding their students across the mountains from a ruined school to safety. In it, he criticised local officials and construction companies for using shoddy materials in schools, an issue that became a major scandal in China (Cohen and Martin 2011).

In May 2012, the fourth anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake, Li shocked the Chinese online community with the following post that recalls his feelings during the visit to Sichuan in 2008:

I was a typical patriot before 2008. I believed that ‘hostile foreign forces’ were responsible for most of my peoples’ misfortunes . . . But my patriotism began to come into question as I stood in front of the ruins of Beichuan High School. It became clear that the ‘imperialists’ did not steal the reinforced-steel bars from the concrete used to make our schools. Our school children were not killed by foreign devils. Instead, they were killed by the filthy hands of my own people.

(cited in Li 2012)

Despite the impressive reach of China’s more popular bloggers, it would be premature to conclude that blogs have a significant impact on China’s political environment. Leibold’s (2011:
(1023–41) recent analysis of the Chinese blogging community concluded that it is ‘producing the same sort of shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world’ (p. 1025). The author argues that Chinese internet users, like their counterparts in the west, are primarily interested in entertainment and socialisation rather than political activism and that political content only represents a very small portion of China’s online environment. As a consequence, the Chinese internet is not much more than ‘an intranet of playful self-expression and identity exhibition’ (p. 1026). Leibold also cautions against applying western-style notions of democratic discourse to China under the assumption that the internet can foster a robust public debate and engage citizens politically in many of the ways that political participation is typically measured in the academic literature.

Microblogging

While traditional blogs remain popular in China, microblogging (weibo) has become the nation’s most prevalent and fastest growing Web 2.0 application in recent years. According to estimates by CNNIC (2014), the number of Chinese microbloggers has increased from just 63 million in 2010 to an astonishing 281 million in 2013, thus representing almost half of the nation’s internet users.

The popularity of Chinese microblogs can be partly explained by their Twitter-like function, their ability to allow relatively free discussions online, and the way they are accessed by most people. Both Twitter and weibo have the same basic functionality, including a 140-character limit on posts and a unidirectional organisational structure of followers who choose to access other users’ posts (Q. Gao et al. 2012: 88–101). It is important to note, however, that 140 Chinese characters roughly translate into 70.0 per cent more characters when translated into English (The Economist 2012). Thus, the succinctness of the Chinese language allows users to say much more within the 140-character limit. Ai Weiwei, China’s foremost artist and political activist, noted that ‘in the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella’ (The Economist 2011).

The most common activities of weibo users include reading news and information, watching video and chatting with social contacts. However, compared to those who use Twitter, Chinese weibo users tend to engage in more interactive dialogue, using the platform more as an online forum with long chains of discussion on specific topics (King et al. 2012: 1–18). Moreover, unlike Twitter, which is primarily accessed through desktop computers and tablets in the USA (Smith and Brenner 2012), most Chinese log into their weibo accounts through their mobile phones. As a consequence, microblogs are easily accessible to China’s 420 million mobile phone users.

Among more than 50 microblogging sites available in China, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are the most popular. Sina Weibo, launched in 2010, reported more than 536 million users in 2014, of which about 54 million were active on the site every day. Sina Weibo is regarded as having an elite orientation that attracts celebrities, professionals, marketers and users of higher socio-economic status. Tencent Weibo, launched in 2009, claimed about 540 million users by the end of 2012 with a community of mostly students and other young adults. A third service aimed at computer gaming, Netease Weibo, exceeded 260 million users in 2012 (Millward 2012).

The enormous growth in the number of weibo users has prompted some scholars to conclude that China is in the midst of a ‘micro-blog revolution’ (Y. Yang 2011; Hu 2010). The enthusiasm for this relatively new communication platform is due to the fact that users often post content on microblogs that is unavailable in China’s state-controlled media, which makes weibo critical for news sources and expression conduits in a media environment that is
characterised by limited diversity (Sullivan 2012: 773–83). Thus, even though microblogs are monitored closely by the Chinese government, they have become an important outlet for public opinion and serve as alternative news sources that often contest the official discourse in China’s mainstream media (Hu 2010; Jiang 2010b; Yang 2009; Zheng 2008).

Chinese weibo have been used to organise political protests and online campaigns in 2012 that have been credited with forcing government concessions, such as an investigation into a labour activist’s death in custody or upgrades to air-quality monitoring in Shanghai (Freedom House 2013). The aftermath of the high-speed train crash near Wenzhou in eastern China on 23 July 2011, which killed 40 people and injured another 192, provides one of the most vivid examples of the political power of social media in this nation. News about the crash first emerged on Sina Weibo, including one post from a survivor who tweeted an emotional appeal for help from the scene of the crash just minutes after the accident occurred: ‘Our train bumped into something. Our carriage has fallen onto its side. Children are screaming . . . Come to help us please! Come fast!’ According to China Daily, this post was reposted 100,000 times in just ten hours. Two hours after the accident, calls for blood donations on China’s weibo resulted in more than 1,000 people promptly donating blood (China Daily 2011).

Attempts by government officials to downplay the accident and order the burial of the derailed train cars were met with public outrage. In order to control the growing anger, the government issued directives on 24 July to restrict news coverage in the state-run media. However, accounts of the restrictions soon found their way on to the internet. In the week that followed the accident, China’s online community posted more than 30 million messages about the crash on China’s two largest microblogs alone (China Daily 2011). Bloggers questioned why the accident occurred and asked whether the government was trying to protect those responsible for the crash. Videos and images of the damaged train cars being chopped up and buried went viral and further infuriated the public. One angry microblogger noted that ‘this is a country where a thunderstorm can cause a train to crash, a car can make a bridge collapse and drinking milk can lead to kidney stones. Today’s China is a bullet train racing through a thunderstorm – and we are all passengers onboard’ (cited in Y. Yang 2011).

On 29 July, the Chinese government issued a second directive that banned all coverage of the accident ‘except positive news or that issued by the authorities’. Major internet portals were forced to remove links to news reports and videos related to the crash. This second directive was widely ignored by China’s state-run media and instead prompted a series of editorials that condemned the handling of the accident by the Chinese government. The editor of the notoriously independent Southern Metropolis Daily, for example, angrily responded on Sina Weibo by accusing the government of a cover-up: ‘Tonight, hundreds of papers are replacing their pages; thousands of reporters are having their stories retracted; tens of thousands of ghosts cannot rest in peace; hundreds of millions of truths are being covered up. This country is being humiliated by numerous evil hands’ (cited in La Franiere 2011).

Compared to China’s traditional media, weibo are faster, more informational and more interconnected. The succinctness of the 140-character limit encourages brief information exchanges on the internet, which many Chinese prefer due to their hectic lifestyle (Wei and Wang 2012). Instantaneous ‘status updates’ also allow citizens with mobile phones to report events they witness long before professional journalists have a chance to do so (Murthy 2011: 779–89). As mentioned earlier, news about the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train accident first emerged on microblogs and only later was reported by the Chinese mainstream media. Thus, the constant flood of information that is generated and distributed by millions of Chinese online users every day can erode government censorship efforts simply through quantity and speed (Wines and La Franiere 2011).
Moreover, as Yi Yang (2011) pointed out, microblogs have not only empowered ordinary citizens, but also journalists working for mainstream media in China. Faced with a growing number of reporting constraints imposed by the government, Chinese journalists have used microblogs to conduct independent investigations and interviews, which they then post on weibo in order to avoid official pre-publication censorship. While it is true that government censors are quick to take down unwanted weibo posts, by the time this is done, the news usually has spread through the online community. Yi Yang (2011) concludes that this process established ‘a new alliance’ between citizens and journalists.

However, as with other types of social media in China, multiple layers of self-censorship also characterise the various weibo services. For instance, Sina Weibo has implemented a comprehensive and proactive form of censorship in which thousands of employees use sophisticated software to monitor frequently updated lists of ‘sensitive’ words and phrases. But despite these controls, Sina Weibo has developed into a mainstream platform that has been described as a new kind of digital tabloid press in which scandals are reported, public opinion is shared and news sometimes devolves into ‘virtual mob justice’ (Sullivan 2012: 779). Thus, as a consequence of the sheer number of online users, the active personality of many Chinese citizens and the Chinese people’s deep mistrust of official information channels, weibo has become a powerful player in Chinese politics (Sullivan 2012: 773–83).

The role of microblogs in shaping political discourse in China has become an important research subject in recent years. Scholars have argued that weibo can influence China’s public sphere in three major ways. First, microblogs challenge conventional notions of news production by breaking professional barriers set by traditional media and by creating free platforms that allow all citizens to express themselves and be heard. The consequence of such (theoretically) unlimited access is the potential for each citizen to set the public agenda. Empirical evidence for such a public agenda-setting process has been found in a recent study by Xie and Xu (2011: 9–14), who showed that Chinese microbloggers not only discussed most of the important events (81 per cent) that occurred in China in 2010, but also were responsible for breaking the news on a significant number (10 per cent) of these events. The study also found that many of the events that were discussed on weibo eventually forced a response from the government and subsequently had a significant impact on public affairs in China.

Other scholars have pointed out that microblogs have revitalised civic participation in China by reducing the cost (e.g. required effort) of political engagement and increasing the benefits of citizen interactions. For example, weibo have been instrumental in the so-called ‘rights defence movement’ (weiquan yundong), which has united ordinary citizens, political activists, journalists and civil rights lawyers in various political and social disputes with the Chinese government. According to Biao (2012: 29–49), rights defenders have used weibo and other social media in China ‘to exert the pressure of public opinion in a way that has increased the cost of judicial injustice’. Thus, social media have empowered Chinese citizens to organise powerful interest groups that can collectively expose civil rights violations, which are then much more difficult to be ignored by the government.

For example, the forced abortion of Feng Jianmei, a 22-year-old woman from a small village in China’s Shaanxi province, sparked national and international outrage and an intensive online debate in 2012 – after the family posted graphic pictures of her stillborn child on Sina Weibo. The image, which quickly became viral, prompted thousands of angry comments that were quickly deleted by government censors. But despite these efforts to limit the impact of the story, prominent lawyers and bloggers began discussing the case and demanded government action. Li Chengpeng, China’s famous activist blogger, angrily noted on Sina Weibo that ‘the purpose of family planning was to control population, but now it has become murder population’. Even
Hu Xijin, chief editor of the nationalistic *Global Times*, criticised the forced abortion on his *weibo* account by writing: ‘I strongly oppose the barbarous forced abortion to this 7-month-pregnant mother. Time has changed and the intensity of enforcing family planning has changed. We should promote civilised family planning’ (cited in Gu 2012). In response, the Chinese government launched an official investigation of the incident, fired two local officials and initiated a review of local family planning offices throughout the country.

Biao (2012: 32) notes that online protests by such informal ‘rights defence’ groups ‘have combined to give rise to an increasingly law-conscious and public spirited populace’. Similarly, Wei (2011: 21–2) argues that Chinese citizens might be motivated by the action of such groups once they believe that what they say and do can affect government policies and possibly their own lives.

It is important to note, however, that the Chinese government has learned that microblogs can be effective instruments to gauge public opinion and advise public decision making (Yu 2010: 143–4). By monitoring the constant chatter on China’s microblogs, the government is able to gather real-time feedback on policies and keep an eye on the public mood (Reuters 2012). As a consequence, local and national governmental organisations in China have launched numerous *weibo* accounts to disseminate official government information (Li et al. 2010: 49–51). According to Zhao (2008), these efforts at ‘public opinion guidance’ not only set the boundaries of political discourse online, but also are clear indications that the Chinese government is using new communication technologies to maintain its legitimacy and support its official policies.

**Online video and *egao***

The growing popularity of microblogs in China has been accompanied by a surge in the number of Chinese who go online to watch videos and short films. According to CNNIC (2014), there were about 428 million online video users in China by the end of 2013, accounting for 69.3 per cent of all Chinese internet users. Recent user surveys suggest that online videos are especially popular among Chinese men (56.1 per cent) below the age of 30 (64.8 per cent) who hold college degrees (80 per cent) (iResearch.cn 2012).

Youku is China’s leading video website and the second-largest online video service in the world behind YouTube. After merging with Tudou.com in March 2012, this video giant reaches about 310 million users, or more than 70.0 per cent of all online video users in China (iResearch.cn 2012). Youku offers Chinese internet users a variety of professionally produced content licensed from copyright holders, including television dramas, feature films, news programming, variety shows, music videos, animated features and sports coverage. It also has produced original online videos, such as Yang Xiao’s 43-minute film *Old Boys*, which had been watched by almost 51 million viewers by the end of 2012 (Youku Index 2012). In addition, Youku has provided a national platform for Chinese video bloggers (*paike*) who often upload and share videos straight from their mobile phones or digital video cameras.

While the most popular content on these video websites is professionally produced entertainment, a growing number of users have begun posting videos to express opinions on social or political issues. For example, there were about 14,500 videos about the Diaoyu Islands posted on Youku in early 2013, about a quarter of them user-generated. The territorial row over the eight uninhabited islands in the East China Sea (known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan) has repeatedly strained international relations between China and Japan in recent years. The dispute also has led to an outpouring of patriotism among Chinese citizens and thus provides a good indication of how popular online videos have become in public discussions of political issues (also see Ma, Chapter 12 in this volume).
While user-generated online videos about the Diaoyu Islands dispute might be welcomed by the Chinese government due to their nationalistic character, other topics, such as the ‘three Ts’ – Tiananmen Square, Taiwan and Tibet – are less likely to remain online. In response to the growing use of online videos for discussions of sensitive political issues, the Chinese government announced tighter regulations of online video services in July 2012. According to China’s State Administration of Radio Film and Television and the State Internet Information Office, online video sites are required to review all videos, both self-produced and user-generated, before they are posted online, or risk penalties including loss of licensing. The goal of these new measures is ostensibly to minimise vulgar, violent and pornographic videos, and to encourage the production of content that ‘reflect the spirit of the times, promote goodness and beauty, and show what people love to see and hear’ (People.com 2012).

Because political criticism is usually deleted quickly from Chinese internet servers, Chinese netizens have pioneered the use of ‘egao’ to circumvent official censorship. Egao, which loosely translates to ‘reckless or malicious actions’, are audio, visual or text-based spoofs that are posted online by a grassroots subculture that takes serious issues and entertains with subversive comedic effects, often in the style of parody or satire (Huang 2006; Meng 2011: 33–51; Zhang 2010).

According to Gong and Yang (2010: 16), egao ‘plays with authority, deconstructs orthodox seriousness, and offers comic criticism as well as comic relief. It provides imagined empowerment for the digital generation, exploring an alternative space for individual expression’. New egao content is created and distributed online as a form of symbolic resistance as soon as new public issues occur (Zhang 2010). These parodies often attract more attention online than mainstream media reporting, and the increasing popularity of video websites enhance the reach and power of egao by offering Chinese internet users an open space to create, publish and share their work. Thus, by appropriating official content into personal expression, citizens enter the digital conversation with entities that previously had monopolised communication channels through political and economic means (Meng 2011: 33–51).

Among countless egao, two of the most popular are indicative of the format’s appeal: the ‘Steamed Bun’ and the ‘Song of the Grass Mud Horse’. In 2006, Hu Ge, a 31-year-old sound engineer and former radio show host in Shanghai, became famous for his 20-minute egao parody of The Promise (Wu ji), an epic film directed by Chen Kaige. Using a pirated DVD, Hu transformed the film’s plot into a satirical crime procedural by re-editing and re-dubbing the original scenes (Zhang 2010). As with many egao authors, Hu used popular culture touchstones to convey his disappointment in the original film and interject humorous context cues. The result lampooned the epic movie and various other societal institutions, and became a national sensation (Meng 2011: 33–51). Tens of thousands of users disseminated the ‘Steamed Bun’, and thousands more actively recreated and enriched the work through their own egao mash-ups of the original film (Meng 2011: 33–51).

While the ‘Steamed Bun’ could be traced to one user and dwelled mostly on artistic and popular culture criticism, the ‘Grass Mud Horse’ story developed in a more ambiguous and decentralised fashion – and more directly involved a strike back at China’s norms of political and social censorship. In early 2009, a short animated video featuring the imaginary ‘Grass Mud Horse’ appeared on YouTube to protest growing government censorship of politically sensitive internet content in the name of removing ‘low and vulgar’ online practices (Meng 2011: 33–51; Shang 2009). Because protest videos against official censorship are removed quickly, the names of the main characters in the video were used to convey a ‘hidden’ message that could at least temporarily avoid government sanitisation. In Chinese, ‘Grass Mud Horse’ is pronounced ‘cao ni ma’, which is almost identical to the profane phrase ‘f> your mother’. In the story, the Grass Mud Horse eventually defeated the River Grab, or ‘hexie’, which resembles the
pronunciation of ‘harmonious’ in the term ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui), Hu Jintao’s signature ideology. The song’s hidden meaning, obvious only to those familiar with Chinese language and culture, but impossible to detect by automatic internet filters, is that government attempts at political control under the guise of building a ‘harmonious society’ will be defeated (Tang and Yang 2011: 675–91).

The ‘Grass Mud Horse’ video provoked widespread public support and participation. Within two months from its February 2009 posting, the imaginary horse and the culture surrounding it developed into a ‘virtual carnival’ of user-generated content that included fake online encyclopaedia entries, video spoofs, comic strips and toy manufacturing (Meng 2011: 33–51). By the time the Chinese government issued an announcement to censor the video in March 2009, it had attracted about 1.4 million viewers, and the foul-mouthed horse had become popularised as a symbol of discontent with internet censorship (Wines 2009).

In summary, egao has emerged as a form of expression specific to the social–political culture in China, and a powerful way to unite people against authority. Egao uses the internet to challenge mainstream government and commercial culture with an active re-appropriation of official content for other purposes, often in the service of criticism of the original material. Unlike western versions of mash-ups, Chinese egao are usually spontaneous, grassroots products uploaded in scattered spots around the internet and social networks by anonymous users (Zhang 2010).

According to Meng (2011: 33–51), egao do not necessarily lead to organised political action, but they contribute to political communication in the sense of maintaining a dialogue about issues that invoke common concerns that are beyond a citizen’s private life.

Response by China’s mainstream media

The response of China’s traditional media to the challenges of digital news has evolved during the past decade. As in many western nations, younger Chinese have abandoned the official news media for the convenient – and often more critical – news available online. This process has accelerated due to the growing gap between actual events in China and the way these events were portrayed in the government-controlled media. As a result, rather than viewing digital media as an enemy, China’s mainstream media began to adapt and collaborate with online media in hopes of survival.

As a result, the first digital newspaper, Guangzhou Daily Mobile Digital Edition, was launched in April 2006. Three days later, the first subscription-based digital newspaper, Wenzhou Digital Newspaper, was published online. By 2008, more than 500 Chinese newspapers had digital editions. However, many of these online newspapers were limited to the content and form of their print counterparts and did not provide multimedia content, more updated information or strong interactive functions (Gou 2008: 44–8).

To better address the demands of an audience that was getting quickly used to multimedia online offerings, the Chinese government began pushing the convergence of different media industries in 2006. It also encouraged the production of multimedia content by the official print media and the development of new channels of news delivery via mobile phones and tablets. A good example is Oeee.com, which was established by Southern Metropolitan Daily in March 2006. The goal of this website is to build a constellation of convergent media outlets. After years of effort, Oeee.com successfully integrated the website of the newspaper, a video website, an online radio network, an online community forum, an online shopping platform and the first Chinese-language news app in Apple’s App Store (Long 2012: 23–5).

By 2012, most Chinese newspapers had launched mobile news apps either on iOS or Android platforms. A recent content analysis of Chinese news apps found that, among the top 400 news
apps, most (247) were offered by newly established media companies (L. Wei 2012). The study also found that media apps launched by new companies surpassed mainstream media apps in terms of content, forms, functions and number of downloads. They also were more successful with integrating user-generated content, updating content quickly and offering more and better customisation functions to their users.

A final strategy of China’s mainstream media was to integrate social media into the news production process. By the end of 2012, most Chinese newspapers had launched their own microblogs as an important interactive link between them and their audience. Even People’s Daily, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party, launched a microblog on Sina Weibo in July 2012. In the following months, the party organ surprised the public with news and information on their official weibo that was very different from the official propaganda style of the paper’s print version. Within two months of activation, the grassroots-friendly writing style of People’s Daily’s weibo attracted nearly 2 million readers. Other government organisations quickly joined the trend and, by the end of 2012, more than 60,000 verified government accounts had established microblog accounts on Sina Weibo (Chen 2012). The quick adoption of microblogs by the Chinese government clearly shows that officials have recognised the power of social media to control public opinion. Social media allow the government to monitor public opinion and, when necessary, push its own version of events through interactive media channels that provide the illusion of an open and diverse public discourse.

Digital media and political participation

In this last section of the chapter, we will briefly review studies that have investigated the potential link between internet use and political participation in China. Due mostly to the controlled political environment in China, empirical studies of political participation remain the exception in this nation. Studies of digital media also are relatively uncommon in the academic literature that focuses on China’s media. A review of media studies published in English-language academic journals between 2000 and 2010, for example, found that only 24 of 159 studies about Chinese media focused on new media technologies (Li and Tang 2012: 405–27). A similar review of new media studies published in Chinese-language academic journals between 2000 and 2007 found only 69 articles that centred on digital media in China (R. Wei 2012: 116–27). While the articles covered a variety of digital media technologies, such as mobile phones, text messaging, blogs, Wikis, e-publishing, internet television (IPTV) and online games, most of the studies were descriptive and focused on technical and economic issues rather than the effects of internet use on individuals or organisations. Ran Wei (2012: 122–3) concludes that digital media research in China ‘lags behind the fast-changing media landscape in the country’ and therefore fails to ‘shed light on the processes of how millions of Chinese adopt, consume, apply, and re-invent new media technologies’. It therefore would seem premature to judge the impact of digital media on political changes in China at this point in time.

In western nations, scholars often see the internet as a new information outlet that can bridge the gaps left by the shrinking mainstream media – and thus as a potential tool to stimulate political engagement in a world that is characterised by digital news (Tolbert and McNeal 2003: 175–85; Postmes and Brunsting 2002: 290–301; Shah et al. 2005: 531–65). Others suggest that the growth of social media and social networking opportunities, partnered with the lowered cost of online participation, offer new platforms for enhancing political participation strategies, links and methods of engagement (Bimber et al. 2009: 72–85; Gil de Zuniga et al. 2009: 553–74; 2010: 36–51). Still others assert that social media make politics more accessible and symbolically empower
citizens to participate through interactivity and the expansion of discussion networks that might be otherwise unavailable (McClurg 2003: 448–64).

Meanwhile, representative empirical data are sparse, leading to conflicting conclusions about the link between social media and political outcomes in western nations. Positive interpretations contend that social media will bolster democracy, while negative interpretations either caution against evidence of significant changes or portend harmful effects such as widening gaps based on socio-economic privilege. There also is some evidence that the self-centred nature of much of social media participation in western nations could be negative for political participation (Fenton and Barassi 2011: 179–96).

Similar to the observed trend in western media research, most studies that test the link between internet use and political participation in China are based on anecdotal evidence and theoretical discussions rather than empirical tests of concrete effects. Wang (2007), for example, discusses the role of online discussion forums in promoting political participation and collective action in China. He examines the role of online forums in three cases that took place in China between 2003 and 2005, and concludes that online forums and bulletin boards have been able to provide more diverse information than traditional media sources and that online posts exerted pressures on government and officials. Evidence for such conclusions, however, is not provided.

Other studies on digital media published in China focused mostly on the characteristics of online public opinion (Kuang 2008: 35–8), mechanisms through which online public opinion forms and develops (Xiang and Cao 2008: 57–60) and how online public opinion can be controlled (Liu 2008: 18–21; Cui and Shen 2008: 45–7).

Probably the most convincing empirical evidence supporting a connection between internet use and political participation in China comes from a study by Shen and his colleagues (2009: 451–76). Based on interviews with more than 6,500 Chinese respondents conducted by the World Internet Project in 2003, 2005 and 2007, the findings indicate a positive association between internet use (such as use of email, bulletin boards, news, instant messaging, chat and online gaming) and online expression (frequency of posting one’s opinion online). This positive association was partially mediated by the size of the respondents’ online network as measured by the number of friends they kept in touch with online. While these findings indicate direct effects of internet use on political engagement in China, the authors note that only one-tenth of the online users in their study were active content contributors in online forums. They conclude that ‘while acknowledging the repressive nature of the state power, this study suggests the incremental structural change brought to society by the internet through expanding users’ social network could cultivate an active online opinion expression environment’ (Shen et al. 2009: 467).

The few remaining studies that have analysed the link between internet use and political participation are based on student samples — and therefore are less representative. One example is Chu’s (2006) comparative survey study conducted in 2004, which tested the potential link between media use and participation among 510 university students in China and the United States. Her findings indicate that exposure to online news was positively associated with public affairs knowledge and political participation in both countries. Similarly, Wei et al. (2011: 90–6) showed that Chinese college students who engaged in more internet activities not only had higher levels of political knowledge, but also tended to be more active users of participatory internet applications such as microblogs and other social networking sites.

A more detailed study conducted by Wei (2014) among 549 Chinese college students in 2011 found that those who read newspapers, received news through social media and belonged to political online groups also were more politically active offline. At the same time, those who listened to radio news, received news through social media, posted on political blogs, talked about politics on social media and belonged to political online groups were more politically
active online. In addition, students who read newspapers and talked about political issues on social media knew more about political affairs. Overall, Wei’s study provides fairly convincing evidence that more internet use is indeed associated with higher levels of political engagement both offline and online.

However, Wei (2014) also notes that political participation among the students featured a fairly limited range of offline and online activities. For offline engagement, the top three activities were joining a student organisation (66.5 per cent), offering volunteer work (60.3 per cent) and working for a political organisation (30.1 per cent). According to the author, a common trait of these political activities is that they are all sanctioned by the Chinese government. Various state-controlled organisations, such as political youth groups organised by the Communist Party or community-centred resident committees (juweihui) aim to socialise young Chinese citizens in ways that are consistent with China’s dominant political ideology and social values. In contrast, more independent participatory behaviours such as signing a political petition (6.4 per cent), contacting a politician or government official (3.5 per cent), attending a public rally or demonstration (3.6 per cent) or writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper (4.4 per cent), were far less common among the students. It was therefore not a surprise that similar engagement patterns were observed in the students’ online participation. The top three online activities were watching political videos (60.8 per cent), communicating with others about politics online (41.5 per cent) and forwarding links to a political video or news article (38.6 per cent). On the other hand, potentially controversial activities, such as signing an online petition (4.0 per cent), sending emails to government officials (3.6 per cent) or starting political groups online (7.5 per cent), were fairly uncommon.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the digital media environment in China and what promises it might hold for those who want to actively participate in this nation’s public sphere. The growing reach of social media, mobile phones and cheap laptops in China indicates that online access is becoming quickly the norm for most citizens. Already, more than half of all Chinese citizens use social media every day, and each year about 10.0 per cent more users join popular social networking services such as Qzone or Renren. Microblogs have become important outlets for public opinion and serve as alternative news sources that often contest the official discourse in China’s mainstream media. The constant flood of information that is generated and distributed by hundreds of millions of Chinese online users every day have created conditions that make it possible to undermine people’s trust in the state-run media.

While a number of content analyses have shown that political blogs contain guarded critiques of the Chinese government, most scholars agree that social media influence the political process in China mostly indirectly by providing people with a forum to discuss political issues that might not find their way into the official state-run media. Because of their size and ability to adapt quickly to any attempts at censorship, microblogs have become an important public sphere in China that should not be underestimated. On the other hand, the Chinese government is also concerned about the speed and ease with which people can organise into active political groups through social media which are difficult to monitor and censor. As political observers have pointed out, social media may produce negative political effects if the Chinese government uses them to infiltrate political groups, track down political activists and distribute propaganda online (Morozov 2011).

We believe that many Chinese online users have become more sophisticated in their attempts to undermine such efforts to control and censor the internet. One good example of
such sophistication is the subversive use of online videos by netizens who have learned to create and distribute satirical content online despite tight censorship rules.

Despite the fact that the rapid growth of social media provides an opportunity for China’s citizens to participate in the political process more directly, empirical evidence of traditional measures of political effects remains elusive. Studies about digital media in China are still the exception and actual tests of the potential effects of internet use on political participation are exceedingly rare. Instead, most Chinese scholars have preferred theoretical discussions of online public opinion and descriptive analyses of microblogs and other social media in China.

Our review identified only four major studies that have empirically tested the associations between internet usage and political engagement (Chu 2006; Shen et al. 2009: 451–76; Wei et al. 2011: 90–6; Wei 2014). The encouraging conclusion is that all four of these studies found positive associations between internet use and political engagement. Shen et al. (2009: 451–76), for example, found that people who are more active online also tend to be more likely to express their opinions online. Similarly, Wei (2014) provides fairly convincing evidence that more internet use is associated with higher levels of political engagement both offline and online. In Wei’s 2011 survey study, college students who received news through social media, read or posted on political blogs, belonged to political online groups or talked about politics on social media, were more active online and offline.

Finally, we must acknowledge that it is difficult to assess the true political potential of the internet in China. The political environment in this complex nation does not allow citizens to be as active politically as they might be in societies where freedom of speech is guaranteed. Many Chinese netizens are afraid to publicly express their opinions for fear of prosecution or simply because they do not want to get into trouble with the authorities. These conditions make it difficult for scholars and pollsters to measure any true effects of online usage in China.

It also would be a mistake to overestimate the power of China’s online community simply because it is so large. China’s 618 million online users do represent the largest group of internet users in the world – but large numbers do not necessarily translate into political power. What is also needed are netizens who are willing to participate in the political process, who are active rather than passive consumers of information and who use digital media not only for personal entertainment and diversion but also for political activism. In addition, the political environment must be open enough for users who are highly engaged to be able to participate without fear of reprisal.

Research has shown that China’s political system has created a huge number of passive online users who are mostly interested in entertainment and socialising rather than in political activism (Leibold 2011: 1023–41). China’s focus on economic growth during the past 30 years also has given rise to a generation of young consumers who participate in society primarily through like-minded friends, family and anonymous internet activities (Rosen 2010: 509–16). Damm (2007: 373–94) argues that the Chinese digital media environment has produced ‘isolated niches’ in which citizens create narrow online identities that reflect their interests and their interactions with like-minded social contacts. At the macro-social level, these niches lead to a more fragmented and localised society. It would therefore be a mistake to assume that Chinese online users are primarily driven by the desire to engage in the political process.

What needs to be done next?

The question whether the internet and its various digital communication tools can significantly influence the democratisation process in China has fascinated Chinese and western scholars alike for many years. As we have pointed out repeatedly, there are plenty of studies that discuss the
theoretical implications of online activity in China. However, very few studies have tested the impact of internet use on political change in China. The few studies that focus on political activism are descriptive and focus on content analyses of microblogs and other social media in China. Consequently, what is needed most are more studies that empirically test the potential links between online usage and political engagement at the individual-user level. The strongest evidence would come from public opinion polls conducted among representative samples of respondents in China. Special emphasis should be placed on avoiding samples that are drawn among college students or residents of major cities in China—such samples are convenient, but very likely overestimate the political engagement of average Chinese citizens because they contain too many respondents with higher levels of education and income.

We also believe that there should be less emphasis placed on content analyses of social media. While such analyses are important, they provide descriptive information only. Instead, future studies should combine content analyses with survey research which allows more useful conclusions about what is available, how such content is consumed or used, and what effects it might have on people’s perceptions or political change in general. Moreover, because the amount and type of political content found on China’s social media is likely a function of citizens’ willingness to express themselves and the government’s effectiveness to suppress and censor information at certain points in time, content analyses only provide a limited understanding of what is going on in China’s cyberspace.

Of course, none of these studies would mean much if they lack a theoretical framework. Western scholars of online media have developed a number of theories that explain the function of the internet in democracies. However, theories that can explain the function of online media in the more authoritarian context of China are sorely lacking. As Guobin Yang (2011) somewhat sarcastically points out ‘change has been under way in China for years, but in forms more subtle than most people outside the country understand’. Thus, instead of assuming direct effects of online usage on political change in China, we need to pay more attention to social and cultural factors that might interfere in such a relationship (Kluver and Banerjee 2005: 30–46). As discussed above, Chinese internet users might not be necessarily interested in political activism, and might engage in the political discourse in ways that are not readily apparent to scholars who are mostly familiar with western media systems. In short, what are needed are theories that better fit China’s specific social, cultural and political environment.

Finally, we would like to encourage studies of online media that have not been explored much yet. The political use of online videos in China, for example, has not received much attention beyond the studies that have explored the impact of 路 videos. The large number of user-generated videos about the Daioyu Islands, for example, shows that China’s netizens have begun to open new spaces of public discourse that support the expression of public opinion in ways that can potentially reach millions of viewers. Moreover, because most of these videos have a rather nationalistic tone, such political content can freely circulate on the Chinese internet without being censored by the government. Thus, analysing the impact of such pro-China online expressions might offer a new perspective for better understanding the political effects of online usage in China.

When researchers attempt to examine the Chinese digital media environment and its effects on political engagement, they are confronted with a mixture of rapid user adoption, growing platforms of online information exchange and cultural conditions that complicate the society in which those developments are taking place. However, these same factors provide exciting opportunities for producing a better empirical understanding of these crucial relationships. We therefore encourage more studies that embrace the impressive wealth of information available to build stronger theoretical explanations for how Chinese use the online world to engage politically.
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