

Preface

The rise of the Internet in China since the country was first “connected” in 1993 has been extraordinary. By mid-2006, the number of Chinese Internet users had reached 123 million, meaning that China now has more Internet users than any country but the United States. Over half of the Chinese Internet users have broadband. The number of Chinese using instant messaging systems has more than doubled in the past few years. By the end of 2005, Chinese search engines (online personal diaries) numbered more than 30 million, and search engines received over 360 million requests a day. The new information technology has also reached China’s hinterland. Almost every county (and indeed many towns and villages) now has broadband. Internet cafés with high-speed connections are ubiquitous and cheap even in remote towns. Fixed-line Internet access is still uncommon in rural homes, but in many parts of the country it is possible to surf the Internet at landline modem speeds using a mobile handset.

The development of the Internet in China has become an increasingly important topic, not only in academic and policy circles, but also in business circles, especially in the United States. Never before has the rise of a new form of information technology stimulated such heated debates. It is not simply the rapid speed of Internet development in China that is causing such consternation. Given the size of the Chinese population and the country’s rapid economic growth, the use of the Internet and other forms of information technology will continue to increase. Central to all the debates related to the Internet are the potential sociopolitical consequences that this new technology could bring. It is widely believed that the development of the Internet is likely to have a significant sociopolitical impact on authoritarian China.

and transform China not only into an open society but also into an open democratic regime. But the reality lags far behind these expectations. The Internet has not been able to promote democratic development in China. Instead, the new technology seems to have become an effective instrument of control for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Years ago, former U.S. president Bill Clinton described China's efforts to restrict the Internet as "like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall." However, as China's Web 2.0 technology has grown more sophisticated, many begin to doubt whether the Internet will ever be able to aid the democratization of China. At a Congressional hearing in February 2006 on American companies involved in the Internet business in China, a Republican congressman, Christopher Smith, said that the Internet there had become "a malicious tool, a cyber sledgehammer of repression."¹

Some began to blame multinational firms that have facilitated Internet development in China, including Cisco, Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo. Some analysts suggest that China's sophisticated Internet infrastructure would not be possible without technology and equipment imported from U.S. and other foreign companies.

The Chinese government worries about the undesirable political consequences of the free flow of information. For decades, the government ruthlessly suppressed any organized dissent inside China. It has also attempted to limit the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The government has now relaxed its control over NGOs in order to transfer some of its certain functions that it used to perform itself. Chinese NGOs have grown steadily over the years. Yet, the significance of NGOs in China varies, depending on their nature and functions. In some areas, such as poverty reduction, charity, and environmental issues, NGOs are encouraged to play a significant role. But in other areas, such as religion, ethnicity, and human rights, the influence of NGOs is virtually absent. While NGOs are allowed and encouraged to use information technology to perform their functions, their ability to criticize the government is extremely limited. They are expected to be a "helping hand" and nothing else.

While pessimists view the Internet in China as merely a tool for governmental control, optimists point out the almost unlimited potential of the technology to generate liberating effects. Chinese Internet users can always use the developed technology to make government control less effective. Take blogs as an example. Blogs make the censors' work much more difficult, if not impossible. China's fast-growing population of blog users knows how to

gage in fierce competition to draw blog traffic to their portals, few checks to be made on who is writing them. A blog can easily and quickly be set up on a Chinese portal, and no one will ask for verifiable personal information.

Compared with more traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio broadcasting, new information technology opens possibilities for Chinese users to communicate among themselves. The mobile phone, text and instant messaging, Windows Messenger (Microsoft's instant-messaging system) and QQ (a messaging service provided by a Chinese company, Tencent) have helped people to form networks on a scale and with a speed that is beyond the government's ability to control.

The freedom of information associated with the Internet is also a reflection of contradictions between the market and politics. Due to various market factors, multinational firms and domestic firms alike have to cooperate with the Chinese government. But exactly for market reasons, firms have to "liberate" themselves from the regulations and requirements set up by the government in order to be competitive in the market. For example, the Chinese government recently issued a regulation to limit phone-card sales. According to that regulation, sellers have to check buyers' ID cards. But the Chinese soon found that the regulation was extremely difficult to enforce. Limiting phone-card sales was just a few shops with the ability to process registration requirements would be a blow to mobile-phone companies and the huge number of private vendors who thrive on such business. Competition between the market and politics becomes intensive. The government can make frequent attempts to limit the functioning of the market, but the market tends to prevail over politics.

The government does control the Internet, but it also uses the technology to mobilize social support for its own cause. The pessimists seem to be too focused excessively on the technical ability of the government to control the Internet. However, once the government uses the Internet for social mobilization, opportunities are created for other social forces to further their own causes, which are not necessarily in line with the government's. This can be exemplified by the rise of Internet nationalism. Because nationalism has become an increasingly important source of political legitimacy for the communist state, nationalist diatribes have a better chance of getting past the censors than other forms of political comment. But nationalism has also provided a convenient cover for experimenting with new forms of activism on the part of social forces. The power of instant messaging, for instance, became evident in April 2005, when it was used to organize anti-Japanese protests in several Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

of the United Nations Security Council. Some 20 million people submitted their names. In competing with Sina, Sohu also gathered more than a million names. These Internet-based nationalistic campaigns certainly provided strong support for the government's Japan policy. Nevertheless, the government soon found that it had to contain such nationalistic mobilization for its cause, once social forces were mobilized, they began to place high demands on the government.

There are also many other cases in which the Internet was used by the government to mobilize social support. The government now desires to propose various forms of malfeasance, such as corruption and mine disasters. A shift to a more "people-centered" approach to governance has led to certain forms of exposure, which means that citizens can push those in power. The boundary between what is legitimate to expose and what is illegitimate to expose is always shifting, and this opens up possibilities for Internet activists to bring about political change. This is especially true when the government is divided. For instance, before the Sun Zhigang case, there were many discussions about changing the custody and repatriation regulations, but they were not changed until the case became known. Then those in favor of changing these regulations were able to prevail upon those who had resisted. The Internet and other information technologies have allowed reform to emerge in the interest of the system. The Internet and other information technologies are capable of strengthening these tendencies.

Due to the Internet's fast-growing influence, even the party leadership has to pay attention to the deluge of public comment. Eager to acquire legitimacy but anxious to avoid democracy, the leadership is trying to turn to populism via the Internet. Premier Wen Jiabao said during the 10th People's Congress in March 2006 that the government should listen attentively to views expressed on the Internet. With few other ways of assessing public mood, the Internet is indeed a barometer, even though surveys of Internet users that are hardly representative of the general population, being young, highly educated, and male.

Both pessimists and optimists can find empirical evidence to support their arguments. In this study, I do not attempt to add more evidence to either the pessimistic view or the optimistic view. Information technology in general and the Internet in particular can stimulate certain types of political change, but not others. For example, the Internet is more likely to promote what social science literature calls "political liberalization" than what is called "democratization." Accordingly, certain types of Internet-facilitated change

it is too early to say which actor, the state or society, will win the battle of the Internet. In the multiple Internet-mediated meeting grounds between state and society, sometimes the state wins and sometimes society wins. This situation is likely to continue in China for the foreseeable future.

This study aims to provide a conceptual framework to assist our understanding of the political impact of the Internet in China. The Internet and information technology are relatively new, and they have not been properly integrated into our theoretical considerations. Given its rapidly expanding influence on our daily life, the Internet must become a part of theoretical thinking on political changes in China. To conceptualize the role of the Internet in China's political life, I make the Internet a part of the literature of state-society relations. Such an approach will enable us to see the mutually transforming effects of the Internet when it comes to regulating relations between the state and society. The Internet is a new platform in which the state and society are likely to interact increasingly frequently. The outcomes of the interactions between the state and society vary. Some interactions can create more power for society. In such cases, the relationship between the state and social forces can be mutually empowering. But other interactions vitiate the power of each side. In these cases, the struggle is one marked not by mutual empowerment but by mutually exclusive goals.

To clarify the role of the Internet in mediating relations between the state and society, this study highlights three points. First, the state must be disaggregated. The state should not be mistakenly treated as a monolithic and unitary actor in interacting with society in Internet-mediated arenas. The state is composed of different blocks, such as key individual leaders, factions, bureaucracies, and levels of government. All these actors have different preferences and interests related to Internet development. Each actor might use the Internet for its own purpose. Complicated relationships among different actors of the state matter significantly when it comes to interactions between the state and society. Interest conflicts or power struggles within the state can create new opportunities for social forces to empower themselves and exercise their political influence on one hand or to lead the government to adopt a hard-line posture toward them on the other hand, depending on the nature of power maneuvering among different political forces within the state.

Second, society, like the state, must be disaggregated. There are different social forces with different Internet-related preferences and interests. In China's political context, social forces are not autonomous in pursuing their development, because they depend on their relations with the government.

organized commercial forces are able to exercise more political influence than less-organized workers and disorganized farmers. Interestingly, the political behavior and power capabilities of social forces in Internet-mediated public space vary. Even for the same social group, its political participation and influence are contingent on the political weight that the government assigns it at a given time. For example, the power of workers and farmers greatly weakened under the Jiang Zemin leadership when policy preferences were overwhelmingly given to newly rising social groups such as private entrepreneurs. But workers and farmers have become more influential under Hu Jintao because the leadership has attempted to implement its pro-labor policy package. The complicated nature of the relations between social forces also complicates their relations with the government over Internet-mediated public space.

Third, the state and social forces are mutually transformative via interactions in Internet-mediated public space. To overemphasize the Internet as a mere tool for the government's control over social forces demonstrates a misunderstanding of real-world power struggles between the state and social forces. The results of the engagement and disengagement of the state and social forces are tangible and even momentous, but outcomes rarely achieve the ultimate aims of either. Their interactions cumulatively reshape the state and social forces. The state might sometimes be able to impose its own agenda of political change onto social forces but not always. It might do so with some social forces but not others. More often than not, the state has to adjust its agenda in order to accommodate social forces. On the other hand, social forces often find that they need to adjust themselves in their interactions with the state. In all cases, the state and social forces are constantly transforming each other, and it is in such interactions that the Internet plays its role in leading major political change in China.