To censor or not to censor: Roots, current trends and the long-term consequences of the Chinese Communist Party's fear of the internet

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Abstract

This article explores the reasons behind the Chinese Communist Party's fear of digital media and outlines its effects on the Party's approach to the internet. By closely examining the heavily-contested field of digital networked media, we see that the control of the internet in China is not only based on censorship but that the Party has been experimenting for some time with a variety of unusual quasi-democratic strategies, each of them designed to go beyond the need for censorship; each of them a new Party strategy to learn from its critics and win public consent for its rule.

Keywords: China, digital storms, CCP, internet, democracy

Introduction

Along with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China now stands among the longest-lasting one-party regimes of modern times. The long-standing resilience of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is built on strong foundations: arbitrary power, indiscriminate use of violence, successful economic reforms, a weak rule of law and strict control of communication/media.

This article focuses on the latter point, the strict control of the media and communication. Specifically, my aim is to provide a new perspective on the role new communication modes play in the Beijing government's long-term survival strategy. Orthodox accounts of China's relationship with the media often emphasise its totalitarian elements, namely Chinese authorities' heavy use of censorship mechanisms

to regulate what kind of information Chinese citizens receive. I do not attempt to challenge the fact that censorship and strict control of the media still play a crucial role in the authorities' exercise of power. I suggest, however, that the Party is slowly, but steadily changing tack. The Party's new approach is deep-rooted in the social and technological development of the last two decades. The constant and permeating spread of digital networked communication such as the internet and its many social media applications has, in fact, had a significant transformative effect on Chinese society. It has: introduced new businesses models, expanded its market, created new sources of revenue for both large and small businesses; reshaped its labour market and acted as the main engine of a vibrant and fast developing technology sector (Woetzel et al., 2014). Social media applications such as Tencent and WeChat have changed the way in which Chinese people buy goods, communicate with each other and generally live their daily lives (The Economist, 2016). More importantly, from the Party's perspective, the internet has transformed both people's attitude towards authority and the intricate dynamics of contestations of power. While citizens feel more empowered to openly criticize the government and its officials and question the validity of government policies, the growing complexity and fast-changing features of this new technological environment increase the Party's efforts 'to find effective means to pursue old goals', such as 'maintaining a monopoly on organized politics, limiting dissent, and censoring some ideas while privileging others' (Yang, Goldstein, and de Lisle, 2016, 3).

Paying particular attention to the threat digital storms and the spreading of internet rumours pose to the Party's monopoly of power, in the following pages I shed light on the reasons behind the Party's growing concern and outline the effects this has on the Party's approach to the internet and its relationship with Chinese citizens in an age dominated by digital communication networks. Considered in media terms, China is not straightforwardly a regime based on censorship. When we examine closely the heavily-contested field of digital networked media, we find the Party has been experimenting for some time with a variety of unusual democratic strategies, each of them designed to go beyond the need for censorship; each of them a new Party strategy to learn from its critics and win public consent for its rule. The first part of this work discusses the use of media as censorship tools, the second part elaborates on the changing attitudes of the Party towards digital networked media and what it means for its future.

State censorship of media has a long tradition in China: it dates as far back as the Qin dynasty when Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi (221-207 BCE) ordered the destruction of books written by his opponents (Confucius' texts, among many others, were considered subversive, hence banned and destroyed). More recently, in the early decades of the Republic of China, the persecution and imprisonment of journalists was the norm, rather than the exception, between 1911 and 1930, when many newspapers were closed and the few that survived the purge became mouthpieces for the regime (Lin 1936, pp. 167-70). During the 1930s the fate of journalists did not improve much under the rule of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT) (Hachten 2010, 20). But it was under Mao's leadership in 1949 that the state's approach became more totalitarian, with freedom of the press hitting its lowest point, with the media becoming the main apparatus of state propaganda. It became essential in spreading CCP ideology and policies; not only educating the masses, but also helping to organise and mobilise them. (Lu 1979, 45) Not surprisingly, media outlets (especially newspapers) were never at liberty to criticise the state or report on unauthorised topics. Between 1958 and 1962, the years of the great famine, at least 45 million people reportedly starved to death in China (Dikötter 2010, pp. 32434), yet the press remained silent about the victims and instead 'exaggerated crop production' (Hachten, 2010, 21). After Mao's death in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the mass communication system underwent a series of reforms. Although censorship did not disappear there were talks of press freedom and independence. The 'honeymoon period' lasted just over a decade. The tragic ending to the student protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989 saw the Party shift its focus towards economic incentives to allow the market to flourish. But at the same time, it further restricted freedom of the press in political matters (Zhao, 1998, pp. 47-51). Ever since, China's media have been trapped in an apparent contradiction: variety of programming and audiences grow, but political freedom from state control and democratization of institutions is still absent. Overall, in political matters, all mainstream media can still be considered, to a great extent, mouthpieces for the Party.

The Publicity Department and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television have the last say on what kind of content can be broadcast to Chinese TV and radio audiences and the frequency and length of entertainment shows; they also instruct networks to give prominence to state-approved news items.

In China, there is no real 'live' broadcasting because transmission delays are used to filter out possible damaging news items, especially when the Party is under pressure ("Radio journalist talks about censorship, delayed 'live' broadcasts" 2010).

Things are more complicated for newspapers: in recent years, the sector has undergone an economic boom, which has resulted in increased competition. There are now hundreds of newspapers with strong linguistic and regional differences, where, under commercial pressures, the likes and dislikes of readers have grown more important than the Party's instructions. The outcome of such a shift is, to some extent, extraordinary: despite Party controls, plenty of in-depth investigative journalism now happens in China (Bandurski and Hala, 2010).

Censoring the internet

State controls in the field of digital communication media, yet the Party's attempt to exercise its censorious grip is proving to be far from straightforward. In 1995, when ChinaNet, the first internet service provider (ISP) in the country, was officially launched, it provided a few select users with a limited range of basic services, such as email, web surfing and newsgroup and chat rooms (Zhou, 2006 pp. 135-38). Since then, helped by government planning, the field of digital communications has expanded at a remarkable pace. There are now more than 700 million users spending on average of over 26 hours per week online, more time than on any other medium. They use the web for a growing variety of activities, such as instant messaging (86%); accessing news (79.6%); listening to music (73.4%) and as blog/personal space (70.7%). Microblog sites and social networking sites, such as WeChat and Sina Corporation's Weibo (like Twitter), are at about 45 per cent usage. (Xinhua News, 2016; "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China 35th Report" 2015)

The Party's desire to promote 'indigenous innovation', to only use technologies manufactured by home-grown companies, rather than being reliant on foreign manufacturers, has helped make Chinese technology companies such as Lenovo, Huawei and Xiaomi major competitors in global communications markets. The Party's stated goal is for China to become an 'innovation oriented society' by 2020 and a 'world leader in science and technology' by 2050 (Bichler and Schmidkonz, 2012; Cao, Suttmeier, and Simon, 2009; Kennedy, Suttmeier, and Su, 2008). In support of a rapidly

expanding service-driven economy, the government has committed staggering sums (US$182 billion by the end of 2017). China is now the leading online retail market (and, at the end of 2014, Alibaba, China's largest e-commerce company, overtook Wal-Mart Stores as the world's largest retailer).

These efforts have also been a boon for employment, with experts forecasting the growth of 3.5 million new internet-based job opportunities by 2020 (China Daily, 2015; "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China 35th Report" 2015;).

From the Party's perspective, these statistics are dazzling and worrying at the same time: on the one hand the internet brings the Party closer to its citizens (for instance, it enhances communication between officials and citizens and speeds up authorities' response-time to issues of public concern); on the other hand, it can have destructive effects on the Party's vision to make China a 'harmonious society' (héxié shèhuì) (Chan, 2010). Hu Jintao, during his time as the General Secretary of the Communist Party (2002-2012), raised the alarm that what happens in this new communication galaxy 'affects the development of socialist culture, the security of information, and the stability of the state'. Therefore, he argued, the Party 'must strengthen efforts to develop and manage Internet culture and foster a good cyber environment' (Hu 2007).

China's rulers fear that the more citizens go online, the more they network with each other, the more the power monopoly of the Party is open to challenge. That is why the Party puts political pressure on national and foreign information technology companies (such as Chinese social networking providers Sina Weibo and Tencent, and American corporations such as Microsoft and Yahoo!) to censor, filter and control the growing flows of data exchanged on the web (MacKinnon, 2013). It is why Party officials insist that a key government priority is to establish a 'clear and crisp' regulatory framework that improves 'management of new network technologies and applications', especially through improved 'emergency response systems' that handle 'sudden incidents' and 'maintain stability' (wéi hù wěn dìng)' (China Copyright and Media, 2012; Creemers 2012). It is also why citizens who break the rules are subject to a wide assortment of informal and legal punishments, ranging from everyday harassment and hefty fines to multi-year incarceration.

The best-known government tool is the elaborate electronic surveillance system known officially as 'the Golden Shield' (jīn dùn gōng chéng), but commonly referred to

as the 'Great Firewall of China' (fáng huǒ cháng chéng). It is a nation-wide electronic barrier that filters and controls information flows so that all data traffic in and out of China's internet passes through a limited number of check-points (gateways) controlled by ISPs, specially programmed network computers, or routers (Walton, 2001). The whole structure is sometimes officially likened to a system of rules and regulations for policing automobile traffic control, but the key difference is that Chinese users of digital media are often left in the dark about the routings and rules of the roads they take. Invisibility is the controlling norm. For instance, unless they have access to leaked memoranda, users never know whether or not the pages they are searching for are unavailable for technical reasons, or whether they have encountered government censorship as the Firewall's most distinctive feature is its secret lists of banned keywords and websites. Computer screens simply show a common error message (such as 'site not found' wǎng zhàn zhǎo bú dào); sometimes, however, if users search for sensitive words using, for instance, Baidu.com, China's most popular web search engine, they might be greeted by a more revealing message that reads: 'according to relevant laws, regulations and policies, the system doesn't show the content you are searching'.

The official filtering system spots homonyms and synonyms and is continuously reviewed and upgraded, with new features such as the ability to detect, discover and block many (though not all) Virtual Private Network (VPN) providers, routinely used by citizens who want to access web services beyond the Firewall. An intriguing feature of the firewalling and filtering process is the way the Party censors keep everybody guessing. It's as if they want to mesmerise their subjects through 'flexible censorship'. Although some web pages (such as the New York Times) are permanently blocked, especially when they publish stories deemed too politically sensitive, the list of censored websites and keywords is not permanently fixed. Some sites are normally accessible, but blocked at more sensitive moments, as happened (in early 2013) to both the Global Times and the Guangzhou-based Southern Weekend after publishing an open letter criticising the Party's rewriting of the Southern Weekend's new year's editorial, headed 'China's Dream, the Dream of Constitutionalism'. The Guangzhou newspaper's website was promptly shutdown, officially because its licence had expired; the open letter page on the Global Times website returned a 'site not found' message; and such terms as 'Southern' and 'Weekend' connected to the incident were suddenly

blacklisted. Under the Golden Shield, such measures are quite normal; constantly tweaked 'flexible' controls that pre-determine what information citizens can download, read, publish or distribute are commonplace. The whole system frowns upon the anonymity of users. Regulations demand that users wishing to create a website must register with internet regulators in person, and present their ID. Real-name registration is a legal requirement for all internet users when uploading videos on online platforms. The same rule applies to all mobile application developers and all microblog and instant message tool users. (China Copyright Media, 2014). The system of censorship naturally requires the cooperation of digital technology companies. Party documents emphasise the need to be permanently on the lookout for 'any threat to the state's power, sovereignty, or the sustainable growth of the economy' (MacKinnon 2013, 36-37-139; "Race to the Bottom": Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship, 2006, 12; China Copyright and Media, 2012). Foreign companies, such as Cisco Systems, the world's leading supplier of networking management and equipment, are caught up in this system; so, too, are companies involved in the building of China's cloud computing industry, such as Amazon, IBM and Microsoft.

Local companies are expected to share their surveillance technologies and user data with the state; they are also required to exercise self-restraint, and to act as zealous gatekeepers of the whole polity. A company that refuses to cooperate with the state may find its business operating licence withdrawn (Mozur, 2014). In principle, technology firms can refuse to comply with official requests, but doing so in practice can be costly, which is why many foreign companies (or their Chinese legal subsidiaries) have cooperatively shared information stored in their own databases with the ruling powers. A prominent case of collaboration is California-based Yahoo! that helped Chinese prosecutors sentence the journalist Shi Tao to 10 years in prison for leaking a government censorship memo on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre ("Information Supplied by Yahoo! Helped Journalist Shi Tao Get 10 Years in Prison", 2005). Local companies tend to be just as compliant. Not only do they proffer information when it is officially requested; they also fuel the surveillance system by zealously filtering data and/or storing users' logs for future use by the Party (Crandall et al. 2013; Villeneuve 2008). Sina Corporation and Tencent, for instance, offer microblogs and instant message services to millions of users and operate rumour-control and website-cleaning teams that employ thousands of staff (perhaps up to

70,000 censors, the rule of thumb being two censors per 50,000 users) whose job it is to block forbidden content day and night.

State censorship of digital media is rigorous. Cyber-attacks, jail sentences and exemplary punishments are vital components of the Party's strategy of keeping tabs on digital technologies and flows of information within and across Chinese borders. The General Staff Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has sections dedicated to cyber espionage and defence from cyber-attack, or what is called technical reconnaissance (jì shù zhēn chá) (Stokes, Lin, and Hsiao, 2011). The Party also uses distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks to punish foreign companies who help Chinese citizens get through the Great Firewall (Marczak et al., 2015). In every case, individuals and companies are equally liable for their misconduct. If caught breaking the rules, punishment may depend on the gravity of the offence: initially offenders may receive an official warning but fines and imprisonment may follow.

Networked citizens (wăngmín) who actively raise and engage issues of public concern can quickly find themselves in trouble. Exemplary punishment of individuals is a favourite deterrent; not even wăngmín backed by millions of followers are automatically safe. An example is Charles Xue, an outspoken wealthy Chinese-American entrepreneur known online as Xue Mansi. Xue was arrested and imprisoned for eight months on alleged charges of soliciting prostitutes. Many independent observers believe he was punished for blogging complaints about the Party's failure to promote political reform. With more than 12 million followers, in the same league as Yao Chen, known as the Queen of Weibo, Xue was paraded on television and forced to publically admit his shame for his sins, which included, among other charges, 'spreading online rumours' and 'losing sight of his place in society'. He was also forced to admit that his huge online following didn't make him superior to the state, and that his online behaviour deserved punishment because it risked producing 'social chaos' (shè huì dòng dàng) (Qiang, 2014).

Digital storms

Exemplary punishments of figures such as Xue Manzi are intended as a reminder to all Chinese wăngmín that the Party is vigilant, and that 'misuse' of digital media for independent political goals has potentially grave consequences. But here, for those who

govern China, there's a fickle, bitter-sweet twist. For an unintended effect of the Party's strategies of tight surveillance and control is that they spark organized public resistance, fight backs by wǎngmín dissatisfied with the way things are. Harnessing a wide range of available tools, including smartphones, tablets, computers and sophisticated software, and ignoring the risks of punishment, these wǎngmín fling themselves into daring campaigns that spread their messages to a wider imagined public, sometimes with dramatic effects. Their actions demonstrate that state censorship can be interrupted; this they do by cleverly applying so-called circumvention technology, including VPN software, to sidestep state censorship and gain secure and full access, even to banned websites and unfiltered search engines such as Google.com. For instance, in 2014, a few days before the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the website Greatfire.org managed to unblock Google.com for users in mainland China by creating a mirror site which enabled them to search for materials that are normally forbidden, such as uncensored information on the student protest of 1989.

Online resistance in the People's Republic of China is not simply the refusal of censorship. Life online is interconnected. Every denunciation of the Party's incompetence, every picture or video of officials abusing their power, every single whisper of discontent has the potential to go viral. That is certainly true for online posts on Sina Weibo and most other social networking sites. They are always difficult to control because their content is shared, commented on, and expanded with other information. Users take screenshots of deleted posts, then upload them as images. If certain keywords are blocked, users invent new coded terms, such as 'getting rice drunk' and 'grass-mud horse'("Google Disrupted prior to Tiananmen Anniversary; Mirror Sites Enable Uncensored Access to Information", 2014) . The examples highlight an important and never-ending dynamic of cat and mouse: as government censorship tactics grow more sophisticated, so do wǎngmín resistance strategies that sometimes have 'swarm' effects, quickly turning into rowdy 'mass incidents', or what I call 'digital storms' (shù zì fēng bào).

What do I mean by a digital storm? Like its geomagnetic counterpart, a digital storm is a brief (politically-charged) disturbance that suddenly begins online and quickly spreads through daily life, thanks to the interest and the concern of large numbers of wǎngmín who in effect form themselves into a public whose opinions

produce a 'media event' (Xu, 2016) that rattles Party officials' calm and may even rock the foundations of the whole political order. The arrest and trial of Chongqing Communist Party boss Bo Xilai (in early March 2012) led it an instance of this effect. Online media carried many tens of thousands of anti-government comments, and even rumours of a possible coup in Beijing, to the point where the government was forced to apply even more pressure than usual on social media. (Global Times, 2012; see also Gao, 2012).

Digital storms of this kind can strike or erupt from apparently insignificant posts. In January 2015, a sanitation worker in Zhengzhou was savagely beaten by a fellow citizen after being asked to stop spitting seeds onto the street pavement being swept. In reporting the story, the government-run television network CCTV called on its viewers to show sympathy towards the hospitalized worker by sharing posts with friends. This unleashed a wholly unexpected reaction as many wǎngmín used the invitation as an opportunity to criticise the CCTV style of reporting and the government's ineptitude in improving the living conditions of sanitation workers.

Digital storms can suddenly erupt fuelled by far graver matters, especially when citizens demand that government officials do a better job of listening, and make good on their stated goals of improving the lives of 'the people', rather than just focusing on the wealthy. In 2013 a Party boss in Taizhou City was suddenly forced to resign after a video and several images posted online exposed a lavish banquet he had organized, the cost of which was far beyond the Party's stated limit for such expenses. Earlier (in 2009) the same fate greeted Lu Jun, the Head of the City Planning Office in the village of Xi Gang in Zhengzhou, Henan province, when he found his career swept away by a digital storm triggered by a questionable response he gave to a radio journalist during an interview. When asked why his council had re-directed funds originally allocated to build houses for the poor towards a new plan to build luxury apartments and villas, the bureaucrat planner refused to give reasons, instead attacking the journalist with an ill-chosen taunt: 'Who are you speaking for? The Party, or the people?' he asked. All hell broke loose, with wǎngmín all over China weighing in, many of them reminding Lu that the Party is the People.

In another case, a user named 'Duan Shui Yu Chen' used Weibo to expose the inefficiency of the authorities in safeguarding citizens' welfare from greedy developers. Duan Shui Yu Chen posted online pictures of three buildings of a housing project in the

Shibei District in Qingdao. The three buildings had fake windows painted on their walls in place of real ones, while the lights in the hallways were not properly installed. Very quickly the post became viral and sparked heated debates among netizens on social networks, ranging from sarcastic remarks about the windows to genuine concern about the quality and safety of government-run estates. The story was quickly shared and reposted on many influential websites and on thousands of Weibo accounts, while the number of users commenting on it grew rapidly. A few hours after the story broke, the Qingdao Municipal City government announced an investigation; three days later it reported, through its official Weibo account 'Qingdao Publicity' that the managers responsible had been punished and the outside walls of the three buildings would be repainted.

Sometimes digital storms push the Party to admit the inadequacy of current policies, as happened during the huge public debate (in early 2015) triggered by Under the Dome (Qióngdǐng Zhī Xià), an online documentary about coal-fired pollution. Under the Dome was viewed at least 150 million times, and then was blocked by government censors. This action sparked even greater fury that was finally quelled by a press conference assurance from Premier Li Keqiang that the Chinese government would do much more to tackle pollution (Mufson, 2015). Similarly, consider the contested issue of the one-child policy, that the government decided to abolish at the end of 2015. For many years it has been an issue the Party tried to keep off the agenda, and yet there were instances when it was forced to address the one-child policy openly. The policy was at the centre of a hotly discussed public opinion poll in 2012 (Wertime, 2012). Discussion had begun heating up since a few months earlier, when a young woman, Feng Jianmei, was forced to abort her seven-month old foetus because the existing law forbade her from having a second child. Despite their efforts, the authorities failed to prevent the story from gaining momentum. They forced a family member to erase a videotape she had recorded to denounce the injustice Ms Feng had suffered, but they neglected to check her cell phone which contained pictures of the mother lying in bed next to her unborn child. When the pictures appeared on Weibo, the story went viral and sparked a digital storm that forced the authorities to publicly intervene and apologise. Though forced abortions are not rare, the digital storm around Ms Feng propelled the issue into the national limelight. On the day the story broke, 'seven-

months pregnant forced abortion' was the most popular search term on Sina Weibo (Birsel 2012).

The problem with digital distributed networks

Why do digital storms of the Qingdao or Zhengzhou type happen? Why, throughout China, is the massive apparatus of media censorship unable to exercise complete control? How does the Party deal with such online backlash?

One possible answer is that the Party rulers, despite claiming to be the servants of 'the people', seem hell-bent on silencing collective expressions of disaffection and complaint. It would be understandable then if they were concerned about the incitement to collective action of digital storms that can provoke wider civil unrest.

All online posts, 'regardless of whether they are for or against the state'(King, Pan, and Roberts, 2014, 891), are subject to censorship. Government anti-rumour guidelines specify that wǎngmín will serve up to three years behind bars if their published content is 'false or defamatory', especially in circumstances that are 'serious', where 'serious' means that any given post is viewed more than 5,000 times, or reposted more than 500 times. (China Daily, 2013) And yet, despite all these censorious measures, the digital storms still happen. Why?

The reasons are often circumstantial; and courage, technical skill and determination of netizens are important drivers as well. But something much deeper is at work, to do with the networked quality of the digital media that are now deeply inscribed within the whole political order of China. To understand why, a clue is provided in the classic work of Harold Innis, who famously argued that media always possess inherent biases that influence the development of society (Innis, 1951). At each epoch of history, Innis points out, dominant forms of media appear. Their interaction with the society that surrounds them creates communication biases that become crucial in shaping processes of culture and value formation. People invent tools and modes of communication, but at the same time they are structured by them. As Innis' disciple, Marshall McLuhan points out, each new technology possesses a quality which is not unlike that of the mythical King Midas, who could transform everything he touched into gold: it quickly permeates every aspect of society, which then transforms itself accordingly, in order to

accommodate that specific technology within its social structure (McLuhan, 2001, p. 151).

Innis and McLuhan's insight that when people communicate with others they are as much shaped by their tools of communication as they in turn shape them, is vital for understanding why digital storms in China happen. Sceptics who insist that digital media can be used equally for 'democratic' or 'authoritarian' purposes, or who say that under 'authoritarian' conditions online activists are in effect mere 'slacktivists', who stand little chance of changing the world by using weibos, crosslinks and clicks, typically overlook this point. They rightly emphasise how digital media are mainly sources of entertainment which 'serve as a great distraction from politics' ; but they fail to see that although China's rich and expanding media environment is interlaced with sophisticated Party control strategies, the digital communication networks upon which they depend are, at their core, distributed networks. These are particular types of networks based on a simple but revolutionary idea: in order to increase the resilience and effectiveness of communication networks, the network design must disavow single centres of control (Baran, 1964).

The key technical point here is that well-developed, distributed communication networks are integrated through multiple nodes that enjoy a measure of mutual independence. That means that when, for any reason, nodes are 'disabled' for instance by Party censors, or 'malfunction', the whole network continues to function through its distributed structure. Depending on the number of interconnected nodes and the complexity of the network, it should always be possible to find a pathway to reach a recipient or a particular type of information, regardless of the absence or removal of an intermediary node. Thus any information sent through a distributed network, for instance by wǎngmín, can—in principle and often in fact— quite easily bypass a node that is controlled, or has been rendered unavailable. In distributed networks, it follows that power, the ability of actors to influence information flows, is never centrally controllable. Power spreads laterally throughout the whole network, which tends to be both dynamic and 'flat', in the sense that it has little regard for pre-defined hierarchies.

The Party's deep dependence upon distributed networks it cannot fully control helps explain the often-bewildering dynamics of contestations of power (such as unpredictable digital storms) that have become chronic features of life in contemporary China. The official enforcement of non-decisions, keeping things off the political

agenda (an unequivocal sign of power), never fully succeeds (see Beam, 2013; Dahl, 2005 and Lam, 2013). In fact, it often backfires and morphs into digital storms that test the foundation of the Party's power. Digital storms, such as over Feng Jianmei, make clear to the Party how difficult is to control information flows in the digital age. At the same time these storms reinforce the perception among the Chinese that resistance efforts are more effective when articulated via digital communication media networks, which become a springboard in the organization and success of political campaigns.

Of course, when confronted by digital storms, the ruling officials have the option of reinforcing their censorship mechanisms, as the Chinese government has done since Xi Jinping took office in 2012. As an ultimate recourse, officials can always opt to shut down operating networks, as they have done several times in the past, especially in regions predominantly populated by Tibetans and Uyghurs. The trouble is that such attempts at fail-safe firewalling prove to be both technically impossible (MacKinnon, 2009) and, in the long-term, damaging for the economy. In other words, resistance by dissenting wǎngmín seems always-possible because digital networks cannot be controlled outright by any single user, or group of users, especially given that the whole Chinese polity, as well as its state-structured economy, are now thoroughly dependent upon the very digital networks the Party desperately tries to control. Unplugging digital networks (especially in more financially advanced regions, such as metropolitan areas in Beijing or Shanghai) would be—if not entirely technically impossible —rather unthinkable for it would have ruinous economic and political effects that would then raise troubling questions about the Party's competence in governing.

Power as shared weakness

Online distributed communication networks tie the hands of the Party and help to explain why it can no longer directly rely on violence as its ultimate 'last word', as it often did in the past (Navarria, 2014). It is true, in China and elsewhere, that power (quánlì) has often been viewed as the ability of actors to achieve certain self-defined ends, despite resistance from others (Weber, 2010, p. 152). The exercise of power backed by force is regarded as a zero-sum game: the strong triumph over the weak, the power of some requires the weakness of others. The greater the Party's power, the weaker people's resistance. That, say the champions of this orthodox view of power, is

the lesson of the crushing violence used in Tiananmen Square. It proves that Chairman Mao's famous maxim that political power ultimately grows from the barrel of a gun remains a timeless truth.

Yet it is not. Although the ruling Party is still prone to resort to violence, and to act in heavy-handed censorious ways to keep order in the field of communications, its growing functional dependence on distributed networks renders it highly vulnerable to opposition from its critics and opponents. It is just one click away from a digital storm. Chinese government censors can, and do, use sophisticated algorithms to sift through the personal data of millions of people; but a single Weibo post or an uncensored video can propagate to millions and stop the Party in its tracks, embarrass it, and force it to recalculate its position. To grasp this dynamic of vulnerability, to make sense of contemporary Chinese contestations of power, a new understanding of power as shared weakness (ruò shì jūn zhān de lì liàng) is needed.

This strange-sounding oxymoron power as shared weakness, tries to capture the fact that within digital communication network settings power relationships are influenced by the distributed nature of such networks, preventing all actors, from the most powerful to the least powerful, from exercising full control over the networks. Power as shared weakness is a paradoxical form of power: all actors are empowered by the recognition of their powerlessness (not their strength). That is, in a digital networked environment, power is the ability to get things done, while all the time being aware that total conquest of opponents is impossible.

The crucial point here is that weakness (ruò diǎn) is an element shared/common to all agents actively present within a network. Seen from the perspective of power as shared weakness, the relation between the CCP and its citizens is thus qualitatively different: weakness and not strength informs their power relationship. Both contenders, the state and its citizens, are affected by the variable shared weakness. It is because of this new paradigm of power based on weakness, rather than strength, that party officials are especially vulnerable whenever wǎngmín band together. When digital rebels re-tweet their posts, or circulate screen shots of deleted materials, or sidestep censorship through mirror sites ("Google Disrupted prior to Tiananmen Anniversary; Mirror Sites Enable Uncensored Access to Information", 2014), they confirm the old rule that power is the ability 'not just to act but to act in concert' (Arendt, 1970, p. 44). Aware of the harsh proverb that Chinese people 'resemble a dish of sand'; digital rebels are

convinced that if the powerless are to turn the tables on the powerful then 'togetherness' and 'solidarity' are essential. Admittedly, under conditions of power as shared weakness, the degree to which, in any given context, relatively powerless wăngmín weaken the powerful Party censors is always contingent on many circumstantial factors, including actors' own awareness of the vulnerability of others. So a wăngmín's perception of CCP weakness is equally important, as it is relevant for the Party: consciousness of its weakness informs the Party's approach to the internet and it can use it to its own advantage.

Democratic strategies and the internet

Despite being often described as a polity shaped by fragmented and decentralised authoritarianism, in which a respect of human rights plays very little role and the welfare of citizens is often overlooked when it contrasts with Party's policies (Landry, 2008; Mertha, 2009), China and its rulers have been experimenting, for some time now, with the tools of deliberative democracy (Leib and He, 2006). There are at least three reasons for this ongoing experiment: 1) a 'founding requirement' for the existence of the Party is to represent its people; the people are in fact regarded officially—at least in the Constitution—as the 'masters of their country'; 2) the Party has come to realise that top-down authoritarian government (especially at a local level) is not always the best option to avoid social and political upheaval: the economic development, among its many benefits, has produced in fact a growing number of clashes between powerful interest groups (whose influence continues to grow) concerned citizens and the government (Zhou, 2012); 3) the Party's growing fear of the internet.

When we look closer, in fact, the dynamics of power as shared weakness help explain not only why the Party is increasingly anxious about the role digital communication media play in the Chinese public sphere, but also why the use of new internet-based democratic innovations might ultimately guarantee the Party's long term survival.

Digital storms can be a nightmare to deal with because they can incite collective action. According to a survey conducted by the People's Tribune in 2010, the majority of people (70% of a sample of 6,243 participants), believe party officials—especially at local level—fear microblogs, because they generate social unrest and public oversight.

More importantly, the study revealed that 50% of local party officials interviewed suffered from 'internet terror' (wǎng luò kǒng jù zhèng), continuously concerned that the flaws in their conduct and work may suddenly become the centre of an online campaign, hence a national news headline (Xutao, 2010). This kind of fear has been met with a straightforward crackdown on internet use and the creation of a new powerful institution, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) whose mission is to streamline and strengthen internet control structures (Alsabah, 2016). Censorship mechanisms, as I explained earlier, are still very prominent in China, but the authorities' response to their fear of digital storms has also produced a much more complicated strategy. Exploiting power as shared weakness to its own advantage, in fact, the Party has begun to respond to wǎngmín threats by using similar means or changing its tack radically, by increasingly relying on new democratic innovations.

Some of these new tactics use the internet as an early warning system. It is an open secret that the Party employs, at various levels and branches of the state's bureaucratic apparatus, an estimated two million internet police agents (wǎng jǐng) and so-called '50-cent bloggers' (wǔ máo dǎng), hirelings who patrol, monitor and influence opinions on the web. There are also small teams of wǎng jǐng embedded within the headquarters of major internet companies. Their goal is to map and to understand the underlying causes of dissent, rather than attempting to quash it with an iron fist, in order to help authorities to react before public discontent swarms. They watch for the first signs of storms or rumours spreading and political unrest, such as followed Bo Xilai's arrest in 2012, the Shanghai stock market crash in July 2015 (The Economist, 2015) or the deadly explosion of a chemical factory in Tianjin in August 2015 (BBC News, 2015).

Some Party innovations go beyond the role of early warning devices for those who govern. Instead their function is to deal with public complaints by demonstrating that the Party listens to the people and is willing to remedy public grievances, above all by collecting and circulating public information.

The field of digital communications is seen by the Party as a vital resource for gauging people's thoughts, cares, worries and grievances, as a medium that makes it 'much easier for governments to interact with residents and thus improve their governance.' (China Daily, 2010), while at the same time, making the government look not only more efficient, but also more representative of its people's will. Remarkable is the way government departments and officials at all levels have opened thousands of

microblog accounts to release authorised information and to receive feedback from people. Study Times, the newspaper of the Central Party School, speaks of the urgent need for officials to get involved in the business of influencing public opinion, to 'act as ordinary wǎngmín', for instance by employing popular bloggers as public relations people, paying them according to their productivity (Zhao Guohong, 2011). The Party teams up with zealously loyal bloggers, such as Zhou Xiaoping and Hua Qianfang, two representatives of what officials call the 'silent majority' of those 'outstanding internet writers' to be praised for 'spreading positive energy', a code term for online activity that toes the party line (Huang, 2014; and Hui and Wertime, 2014). The Party also recruits 'internet red sentinels' from within the country's Communist Youth Leagues. They are asked to be the guardians of the government's reputation by monitoring and reporting offending comments, and by writing each week at least one positive comment for each negative comment appearing online (山西国企欲招志愿者收集网络舆情并正面回应 (Shanxi state-owned enterprises want to recruit volunteers to collect public opinion and a positive response network), 2011) The Party also encourages state organisations to collect and circulate useful public information. An example is the official microblog of the Beijing Emergency Medical Centre, which earned high praise for its role in quickly informing concerned citizens in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear catastrophe in Japan (Microblogging offers new platform for officials, 2011). The government body, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), has done something similar. Its 'Blue Map App', designed to inform citizens in real-time about water quality, local sources of pollution, and to scrutinise emissions from polluting companies, has been downloaded many millions of times. The data collected through the app, which enables users to input updates via their smartphone, is then shared with hundreds of companies in the power, steel, chemical and petrochemical fields, to encourage them cut their contaminating emissions levels (蔚蓝地图（污染地图2.0版 (Blue Map (Pollution Map 2.0 Version), 2015).

Still other digital innovations are used by the Party with a quasi-democratic attitude to stimulate public involvement by drawing wǎngmín and other citizens inside the structures of government. E-consultations (wǎng luò zī xún) and online Q&A (wǎng shàng wèn dá) sessions with wǎngmín for instance. They signal a shift in the Party's whole approach to using digital media to solve issues of public concern: no longer used as a means of top-down decision making and control, digital media are mobilised

instead to focus much more on involving people 'from below' in the processes of government administration. Officials routinely call on wǎngmín to become digital 'debaters', for instance through such influential corporate platforms as Sohu Focus Comment and Sina Current Affairs Forum and the state-controlled Xinhua Development Forum. The high-profile People Power Forum, described by its host (the People's Daily) as 'the most renowned forum in the Chinese language', claims to be 'the first forum on politics built by Chinese internet media' (Yong and Jie, 2005). Around 200,000 users come online at peak hours, and prominent Party politicians (Hu Jintao among them) visit the forum to engage with wǎngmín through live web chats (Haizhou and Yinan, 2008). Two-way communication channels, in the form of e-government websites, are now a requirement for all government departments, at all levels. These websites have evolved from being simple bulletin boards used for announcements by bureaucrats into more adventurous consultative devices, such as virtual petition sites and online webcast forums.

The province of Guangdong is known for its innovative public involvement schemes. The Guangzhou administration (it says) uses digital media 'to listen to people's voices', 'gather people's wisdom', 'answer people's questions' and to ease 'public grievances'. Following the CCP call to improve 'the socialist system of deliberative democracy' (shè huì zhǔ yì xié shāng mín zhǔ zhì dù) (Deng Xu, 2012), the administration has introduced a microblogging platform to enable the members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) to reach out to 'the people'. It soon applied these stated principles of 'deliberative democracy' to inform citizens and invite their participation by launching a 'network hearing' (wǎng luò tīng zhèng) to consider the formulation of new medical insurance regulations. Broadcast live by the Dayang Network, with hand-picked presenters expressing their views on the proposed changes, the public was asked to make comments and to vote online for the changes they supported. It was the first time in China that this kind of 'network hearing' was used. Meanwhile, several other cities in Guangdong province are experimenting with virtual petition offices, online webcast forums where citizens can raise complaints and watch and hear officials handle them. These new petitioning mechanisms can be understood as 21st-century incarnations of an ancient Chinese custom of humble people lodging petitions (xìnfǎng) in support of their grievances. During the Qing dynasty, for instance, it was not unusual for subjects to travel all the

way to the capital, kneel and weep before the Emperor, to lodge a petition, in the hope for action against corrupt local officials (Hung 2013, 1, 76–77). In today's China, a visit to a xìnfǎng office to lodge a complaint or request is time-consuming. In the worst-case scenario, it is a risky business. After a long journey to the State Bureau for Letters and Calls in Beijing (guó jiā xìn fǎng jú), sometimes the visit ends badly, in the putrid darkness of a 'black jail' (Tatlow, 2014; see also, We can beat you to death with impunity - secret detention & abuse of women in China's 'Black Jails' 2014).

The great advantage of the new virtual petition offices is their simplicity and openness. They are deemed important by the Party because they simplify the whole procedure of receiving and dealing with public complaints. They encourage citizens to communicate with officials, providing them with a virtual platform to raise issues, to track the progress of their claims and (so officials say) to help citizens feel that they, 'the people', are in reality the Party.

Similar claims are made by officials about the 'electronic mayor's mailboxes' developed in the Yangzi Delta cities of Hangzhou and Nanjing. These platforms are said to promote bottom-up feedback, make public administration more accountable (gong sí) and to persuade people that local government is efficient and effective.

Another trend that appears to be gaining ground throughout the polity is the growing use of particular types of digital platforms for encouraging people to scrutinise procedures and officials of the Party state. A small example with wider significance comes from the streets of Jinan, in Shandong province, where (in August 2011, according to a local microblog user) an elderly woman was beaten by a uniformed police officer. The story quickly went viral, prompting an equally rapid response from the local police, who confirmed through their own microblog account that the 'female prison guard, not a police officer, involved in the case' was already under interrogation at the police station (Police react to blogging about street chaos, 2011).

Large-scale efforts by the Party to expose its own malfeasance, and to take firm action against the misconduct of its governing officials, are also taking root. A case in point is the anti-corruption web reporting platform (www.12388.gov.cn) hosted on the official website of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the Ministry of Supervision of the People's Republic of China (www.ccdi.gov.cn). Using their real names, although this is not a mandatory requirement, citizens are

encouraged to engage with the site to report the wrongdoings of government officials, at all levels. The range of possible matters is defined widely, to include 'political discipline', 'democratic rights', financial tax regulations, population and family planning regulations, and government procurement and bidding procedures. The site also encourages complaints about corruption, bribery, hidden property and other assets, assaults on other people's rights, pornography and prostitution.

Conclusions

All these initiatives, all the trends in the field of digital communications described in this article, serve as reminders that the whole story of digital media and politics in China is not straightforwardly reducible to matters of complex censorship mechanisms. There is much more beyond that. The trends reveal, in fact, how the technological revolution of the last two decades has forced Party leaders and officials to confront a new type of weakness: in a heavily networked society, where nothing is set in stone; there are no easy solutions to the Party's continuous struggle to avoid digital storms, to keep the status quo unchanged, and to produce and control public opinion. The core problem of the Communist Party's complex love-hate relationship with the internet is traceable to the distributed quality of its networks. Online networks are designed to disregard any single centre of power and to treat hierarchy as an obstacle to their smooth functioning. The philosophy underpinning networks is entirely at odds with the CCP's historical vision of its leadership role in Chinese society. The internet's structural resistance to top-down control injects a measure of uncertainty and 'weakness' in the complex power/conflict dynamics between the Communist Party state and its citizens. 'Weakness' here refers to the practical impossibility of any actor within this new galaxy of communication to exert complete control over a highly distributed network within the complex network of networks known as the internet. Awareness of this shared weakness is a powerful enabler of bold and irreverent new forms of resistance that signal just how different the internet is from traditional patterns of mediated domination. The tragic events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 taught the government of Beijing an important lesson: not only can media strengthen protests by stoking their momentum, but when protests are over the media are the repository of potentially dangerous collective memories. Over a quarter of a century later, Chinese

citizens have at their disposal a much wider array of powerful new media to communicate with each other instantly and cheaply. They can constantly monitor the movements of the powerful and quickly organise acts of resistance. This trend, the Communist Party knows too well, is likely to strengthen in years to come. So it is exactly because the internet enables Chinese citizens to openly contest and restrain the party's monopoly on power, that the CCP has grown deeply concerned with controlling information flow over digital communication networks. However, the inability of existing control mechanism to prevent digital storms from happening has made the Party more aware that control is not enough, that it needs to change tack radically if it wants to survive in the digital age. China's rulers are profoundly afraid of how people might use the internet, especially during extended periods of social unrest. To survive the Party must learn to guide and influence public opinion through the internet, as a tool of persuasion beyond censorship and control. 'The correct guidance of public opinion benefits the party, benefits the nation, and benefits the people', Hu Jintao once famously said, before adding: 'Incorrect guidance of public opinion wrongs the party, wrongs the nation, and wrongs the people' (Bandurski, 2008). Behind the official hyperbole, such statements hide a more deep-seated awareness of the unpredictability of the future. As Hu's successor, Xi Jinping, put it, the sphere of digital media should be considered the 'biggest variable' in predicting China's future and, thus, the most serious 'worry' in the 'hearts and minds' of the whole Party (Xinhua News, 2014). Hence the CCP's greatest fear: that the combination of people's will and networked media skills might make a line of menacing tanks incapable of saving the Party from historical oblivion. It is only by scrutinising further the CCP's changing approach to the internet through the prism of power as shared weakness that a more reliable assessment about the future and resilience of China's one-party state can be achieved.

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