

# Logic of the Internet Politics in China

**Dazhou Wang \***

*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Academy of Sciences  
19A Yuquan Rd., Beijing 150001, China. Email: [dzwang@ucas.ac.cn](mailto:dzwang@ucas.ac.cn)*

**Kaixi Wang**

*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Academy of Sciences  
19A Yuquan Rd., Beijing 150001, China. Email: [wkx19910129@163.com](mailto:wkx19910129@163.com)*

## Abstract

The Internet has been recognized as the perfect symbol of universal association and is able to change the conditions of human existence. It is argued that the establishment of cyberspace as an unlimited space for informational networks affords unrestricted movement in a pure space that is free of friction, ethereal and virtual. As Negroponte pointed out in his influential book, *Being Digital*, the Internet space guarantees everyone fully express their voices. So, it was said that the Internet, “far from being an institution of control, will on the contrary be an instrument of freedom, promising modern humans the ability to shake off the yoke of bureaucracies” (See [1]). In his *The Internet Galaxy*, Manuel Castells declares that the Internet “is indeed a technology of freedom”[2]. He argues that the Internet has extraordinary potential for the expression of civil rights, and communication of human values, and provides a new arena for the development of civil society. Jacques Attali even announces that democracy will be electronic and “the political will disappear” thanks to the network (See [1]). The Internet is thus considered to be anti-hierarchical “in essence”, becomes synonymous with self-regulation and equality. If Proudhon were alive today, he would argue that such a positive effect of the Internet is not an autonomous outcome; rather, it could be perverted by political centralization. As the advocate of critical constructivism, Andrew Feenberg asserts that the Internet is “an unfinished technology and a terrain of struggle”[3], so there is indeed a real politics concerning the Internet. As a matter of fact, numerous writers note that the authorities in the real world are trying to structure the order on the Internet, so that the dystopia seems to be a possible prospect. For example, S. Zuboff proposes that the Internet would function as the electronic-information panopticon [4]. Indeed, the government is best positioned to regulate the Internet through controlling its underlying codes and structuring the legal environment in which it operates [5]. Langdon Winner reminds that computer users are in danger to be reduced to the condition of techno-serfs, powerless participants in the Internet who find themselves fully subservient to the new lords of the realm, and that laws that supposedly protect the rights and liberties of citizens are regularly and secretly breached when it suits the purposes of the military-security-industrial matrix [6]. So, there is a sharp opposition between two kind of social images of the Internet, paradise (utopia) vs. panoptican (dystopia). To the authors, the question is not so much how to choose either this or that position as how to think about the complicated co-evolutionary process of the Internet and society.

The experiences of China in development of the Internet provide a unique locus to test the abovementioned thoughts about the political implications of the Internet. As a newly-rising power in the world, China has been experiencing rapid development of the Internet since the later 1980s. According to the survey by CNNIC, by the end of June 2014, China had 632 million Internet users, and the penetrate rate is 46.9%, of all users 527 million

are accessing the Internet via cell phones; the proportion of mobile phone usage in netizens grows up to 83.4%, excess the traditional PC usage, which is 80.9%, for the first time, indicating the arrival of the era of the mobile Internet [7]. Being referred to as the “entertainment superhighway”, the Internet in China also serves as the first public forum for Chinese citizens to freely exchange their ideas. Under background of the centralized political system, the Internet has affected and been affected by the society at the same time. In fact, Chinese leaders and officials at all levels of governments always live in an ambivalent situation in terms of the development of the Internet. On one hand, they need to promote the development of information technology, for “science and technology is the first productive force”; on the other hand, they know clearly that to stimulate the development of the Internet is almost certain to produce such unintended consequences as social protests and the upsurge of collective actions. Therefore, China has established a parallel governance structure: one is used to promote the development of the Internet industry, and the other for the implementation of political control.

As a result, the Internet service in China has faced constant interference by the so-called Great Firewall and the army of online censors [8-10]. As the latest development, Chinese government starts to sell the conception of Cyber-sovereignty to the international society which holds that national governments should have the right to supervise, regulate, and censor all electronic content transmitted within their borders. Therefore, the Internet is certainly not an independent variable, and the politics has made huge differences in the Internet in China. Moreover, in fear of closure, online service providers have to adopt technical means and hire moderators to monitor user-provided content. This kind of censorship and self-censorship has made the Internet in China so different from that in the West. The so-called universal associations through the Internet is still undoubtedly a dream. This situation in China seems to be panopticon in terms of Michel Foucault’s analysis. Indeed, with the development of the Internet, Chinese authorities have been empowered by the Internet, and the censorship on the internet has advanced so superbly that individuals have been under tighter surveillance and control. So the image of the Internet as the panopticon appears to be near to the reality in China [11]. As a revised version of panopticon, Yu came up with the concept of “onlooking prison” to describe the structure of Internet in China, where regulators lose their full control of information resources, and the public is able to monitor the behavior of the “guards” and to have their appeals heard and satisfied [12].

In despite of this, vigorous public debates and participations have still occurred in the Internet space, which has played an increasingly important role in Chinese political lives. Actually, with the new information dissemination mechanism, the Internet has exacerbated social instability by intensifying the netizen’s perception of the gap between the rhetoric, made by the authorities, and social reality, and by endowing them resources and moral support in collective actions. As a kind of communication platform, the Internet in China has become not only the place for ordinary people to express themselves, but also the place where they can organize themselves for common political appeals. The Internet thus has brought a larger space for civic participation in social-economic-political affairs, and the increasing mass incidents spread online and the public opinion gathering has highlighted the power of civic forces [13-15].

So, with the experiences of China in development of the internet, the author expounds that there is a real politics in the development of the Internet; the Internet is still in an evolutionary process, giving rise to a variety of possibilities, and it seems to be more suitable to speak of “internets” rather than the Internet; the more suitable image of the Internet is laboratory [16] rather than paradise or panopticon. Therefore, the transformation of

society mediated by the networks from the closed situation to universal association is not so much an autonomous process as a series of real social-political choices, and that What needed is exactly cosmopolitics with “foresight”, by which a variety of stakeholders of the society participate to discuss and design collectively their common future. Different from forecasting or prediction, the concept of foresight presumes that the future is uncertain and there are more than one possible development path [16], and that which one be realized largely depends on collective projecting in advance. So, through foresight, people can better harness technical networks to serve better the interests of the community. Although we cannot determine the outcome of our choices, but the choices still matter, just as a Chinese old saying, “the planning lies with man, and the outcome with Heaven”. In this regard, to set up a proper political framework to govern the co-evolutionary process of the Internet and society is of especially importance.

The paper is organized as follows: following the Introduction in Section 1, Section 2 analyzes the dynamics of political change in China. Section 3 analyzes what differences the Internet has made in Chinese politics. Section 4 analyzes what differences the Chinese politics has made in the Internet. Section 5 concludes the article with a discussion of the relationship of China and the future of the global information society.

**Key words:** Internet; microblog; politics; laboratory; information society; China

## References

- [1] Musso, P. (2013). Network Ideology: from Saint-Simonianism to the Internet. SPT 2013 Conference - Lisbon, 01-48.
- [2] Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.1
- [3] Feenberg, A. (2014). Great Refusal or Long March:How to Think about the Internet. *Journal of Engineering Studies* 6(2): 146-155.
- [4] Zuboff, S. (1988). *In the Age of the Smart Machine: the Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- [5] Lessig, Lawrence, (1999). *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.
- [6] Winner, L. (2014). A Future for Philosophy of Technology – Yes, But On Which Planet? *Journal of Engineering Studies* 6 (2): 141-145.
- [7]CNNIC. *The 34th Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China*, July 2014.  
<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxyzbg/hlwtjbg/201407/P020140721507223212132.pdf>.
- [8] Wang, S. S., & Hong, J. H. (2010). Discourse Behind the Forbidden Realm: Internet Surveillance and Its Implications on China’s Blogosphere. *Telematics and Informatics*, 27, 67-78.
- [9]Kim, W. S., and Douai, A. (2012). Google vs. China’s “Great Firewall”: Ethical Implications for Free Speech and Sovereignty. *Technology in Society*, 34, 174-181.
- [10]Yang, Q. H., & Yu, L. (2014). What’s on the Other Side of the Great Firewall? Chinese Web Users’ Motivations for Bypassing the Internet Censorship. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 37, 249-257.
- [11] Liu, Yongmou, (2014), *Minerva in Action: The Power Dimension of Contemporary Cognitive Activity*. Chengdu: Southwest Jiaotong University Press.
- [12] Yu, G. M. (2009). Media Revolution: From Panopticon to Onlooking Prison. *People's Tribune*, 16, 23-25.
- [13] Zheng, Yongnian, (2008). *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*. Stanford University Press.
- [14] Mou, Y., Atkin, D., Fu, H. L., Lin, A. C., & Lau, Y. T. (2013). The Influence of Online Forum and SNS Use on Online Political Discussion in China: Assessing “Spirals of Trust”. *Telematics and Informatics*, 30, 359-369.
- [15] Li, Qiang, and Liu, Qiang, ed., (2014). *The Internet and Transitional China*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- [16] Latour, Bruno, (1983). Give Me a Laboratory and I will Raise the World. In K. Knorr and M. Mulkay ed., *Science Observed*, Sage: 141-170.
- [17] Martin, Ben R.(1995). Foresight in science and technology. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 7(2), 139-168.