

China: The CCP vs. Wǎngmín

The last two chapters focused on how the evolution of the networked citizen has changed the dynamics of political engagement in two established democracies, the USA and Italy. Both cases helped us clarify not only what makes the ideal networked citizen a valuable asset in the fight against hubris, in other words a vital agent of political change, but also on its more hidden weaknesses. Being fully embedded within a digital network, in fact, can make citizens vulnerable to unprecedented and concealed manipulation. Political campaigners, for instance, can exploit the wealth of data available online to tweak their message or spread misinformation about their opponents, as we saw in the case of the election of Donald Trump. And in most cases, citizens are not even aware of having been manipulated. This kind of exploitation, however, is not exclusive to democracies. Non-democratic systems have much more to gain from it. The potential manipulation of networked citizens and the increasingly sophisticated use of digital media to exert control over those authorities consider ‘unruly’ have become, contrary to cyber-optimistic forecasts of time past, a lifesaver for shaky authoritarian regimes. To clarify this point, in the following pages, we shift our attention onto the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and provide the reader with an in-depth look on the ways in which new digital communication media networks are helping reshape the relationship between the government of Beijing and its citizens.

Along with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the PRC now stands among the longest-serving one-party regimes of modern times.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) long-standing resilience is built on strong foundations: arbitrary power, indiscriminate use of violence, successful economic reforms, weak rule of law and strict control of communication media. This section focuses on the latter point. Orthodox accounts of China's relationship with communication media often emphasise its totalitarian elements: namely Chinese authorities' heavily use of censorship mechanisms to regulate what kind of information Chinese citizens receive. This section does not attempt to challenge the fact that censorship and strict control of media still play a crucial role in the authorities' exercise of power. It suggests, however, that the Party is slowly, but steadily changing tack. Like in the cases discussed earlier, the Party's new approach is deep-rooted into the social and technological development of the last two decades. The constant and permeating spread of digitally networked communication media such as the Internet and its many social media applications has had in fact a significant transformative effect on Chinese society: it has introduced new businesses models, expanded its market and created new sources of revenue for both large and small businesses; it has reshaped its labour market and acted as the main engine of a vibrant and fast-developing technology sector¹; social media applications such as Tencent WeChat (*Weixin* 微信 in China) have changed the way in which Chinese people buy and consume goods, communicate with each other and in general go on living their daily life, but 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.² While citizens feel more empowered to openly criticise the government and its officials and question the validity of its policies, the growing complexity and fast-changing features of this new technological environment increase the Party's struggle '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'.³

Paying particular attention to the threat digital media 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

¹Woetzel et al. 2014.

²Negro 2017; Kent, Ellis, and Xu 2018.

³Yang, Goldstein, and de Lisle 2016, 3.

growing anxiety and outline the effects said anxiety has on the Party's approach to the Internet and its relationship with Chinese networked citizens in an age dominated by digital communication media networks. The section ultimately shows that, considered in media terms, China is not straightforwardly a regime based on censorship. When we examine closely the heavily contested field of digitally networked media, in fact, we find the Party has for some time now been experimenting with a variety of unusual democratic strategies, each of them designed to go beyond the need of censorship and each of them a new Party's strategy to learn from its critics and win public consent for its rule. The first chapter in this part discusses the use of media as censorship tools, and the second instead elaborates on the changing attitude of the party towards digitally networked media and what it means both for its future and that of Chinese networked citizens.

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