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Liberating or Constraining?

How technology capital is reshaping the media landscape in China

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In late 2015, as a print journalist working in China, I found myself suddenly being dragged into a whirlpool created by homegrown tech giants: not only in the sense that new media are rapidly transforming news production and consumption, but also that their financial might is continuously shifting resources allocation in the tightly controlled industry. As many other print journalists, I was baffled, struggling to make sense of their influence on freedom of speech and of the press.

Therefore, I am grateful to the Thomson Reuters Foundation for sponsoring my six-month study, which I spent searching for answers at the University of Oxford, among world-renowned academics, researchers and journalists.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: CHINA'S MEDIA MARKETISATION 2.0

Inside the Great Firewall, China's technology companies have been actively building a parallel alternative to the global cyber sphere: Baidu replacing Google, Weibo substituting for Twitter, WeChat in place of Facebook, with a series of other applications that provide more or less similar services to such brands as YouTube, Instagram, etc.

As with their counterparts in the West, these digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) have also been drastically changing the way Chinese people consume information, interact with each other, and express themselves online.

Under ubiquitous censorship, political discussions are strictly off-limits in China. But that does not prevent ICT companies from achieving commercial successes: the market capitalisation of Nasdaq-listed Weibo - owned by e-commerce giant Alibaba - is now roughly the same as Twitter¹; WeChat saw monthly active user surging to 889 million by the end of 2016, ² helping fuel advertisement sales and revenue of its owner Tencent, China's leading social media and gaming company.

Their prosperity is ensured by a continuous surge in China's digital population: by the end of 2016, China had 731 million internet users, a size almost on par with the entire population of Europe, at 734 million. Among them, 695 million - or nearly a half of China's population - are on mobile.³

Their influence does not stop here. Over the past few years, capital from ICT companies, particularly the three tech giants Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent, have gushed into the whole spectrum of media in China, taking full control or holding significant shares in media companies ranging from

¹ "China's Weibo eclipses rival Twitter's market capitalisation", *Financial Times*, Feb 13, 2017

² *WeChat User and Business Ecosystem Report 2017*, Tencent Online Media Group, April 2017

³ *The 39th China Statistical Report on Internet Development*, China Internet Network Information Centre, January 2017

legacy newspapers, digital-born news sites, instant messengers, to online literature publishing sites, live streaming platforms, and even TV and film production companies.

Elsewhere such a wide and active connection to the internet would have brought “political turbulence”, as “tiny acts” of online participation – tweets, re-tweets, petitions, liking and sharing – could easily mobilise people into collective action, at local, national and global levels.⁴

In their initial years, until around 2012, Weibo - among several other similar microblogging sites that subsequently lost out in competition or were ordered to shut down - played a positive role in opening up political discussions about scandals of elite members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and by accelerating information circulation in cases of major social events,⁵ prompting optimistic conclusions that the use of social and new media in contemporary China “transformed the relationship between Chinese citizens and their government”.⁶

Yet China’s party-state has since learned quickly to adapt to the challenges of rising online activism and the spreading of liberal ideals promoted by “opinion leaders” with millions of followers on social media platforms. Rebecca MacKinnon finds a new model of “networked authoritarianism” where the CCP has “adapted to the internet much more successfully than most Western observers realise” with legal, regulatory, and political tools and strategies that go beyond Internet filtration.⁷

ICT companies are held responsible by regulations and laws for censoring and policing contents appearing on their platforms. Sina Weibo has set up a special in-house police office⁸ with full-time

⁴ Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*, Princeton University Press, 2015

⁵ Rogier Creemers, “Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century”. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2017, 26:103, 85-100

⁶ Mary Kay Magistad, “How Weibo is Changing China”, YaleGlobal, August 2012, retrieved on June 28, 2017 <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/how-weibo-changing-china>

⁷ Rebecca MacKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’”, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and Struggle for Democracy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012

⁸ “China to Tighten Grip over Country’s Internet Users”, *Financial Times*, August 5, 2015

officers deleting “fake news” and “harmful information” and locating people who post such information, in some cases, detaining and imprisoning them. Researchers have confirmed WeChat is censoring private group chats.⁹ Baidu’s search engine prospered on government’s blockage of Google, which refused to censor search results and eventually chose to quit the China market.¹⁰

Evgeny Morozov worries about the trend toward commercial outsourcing of Internet control to private companies that are forced to take on a broad “self-policing” role, which may prove even more effective than direct state control, because the commercial Internet companies “are more likely to catch unruly content, as they are more decentralised and know their own online communities better than do the state’s censors.”¹¹

These scholarly discussions all offer crucial insights into understanding the nuanced and complex control of China’s Internet, but they tell only part of the story about how China’s ICT companies are transforming the country’s tightly-controlled media arena under authoritarian rule.

Through taking control or holding shares in a full spectrum media organisations, both old and new, their influence has seeped through the whole public sphere in what I suggest is a second wave of China’s media marketisation.

⁹ Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, Jason Q. Ng, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “One App, Two Systems: How WeChat uses one censorship policy in China and another internationally”, 2016, retrieved on June 28: <https://citizenlab.org/2016/11/wechat-china-censorship-one-app-two-systems/>

¹⁰ Cho Wen-chu, “Censorship or Protectionism? Reassessing China’s Regulation of Internet Industry”, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol.7, No.1, January 2017

¹¹ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*, Chapter 4, Public Affairs, 2011

The first wave of China's media marketisation, which dates back to the late 1980s, saw a boost in journalistic professionalism, best presented by a flourish of investigative journalism, despite the limitations and controversies over its functions under an authoritarian regime.^{12 13}

In this research, I want to examine the impact of the second wave of media marketisation, particularly whether the cash-rich ICT companies and the new media technology they bring are asserting a liberating force or constraining force¹⁴. In his book *Liberation Technology*, Diamond argued that the liberating force of ICTs, particularly new media, lies in that they could speed up information exchange and offer venues for more autonomous and pluralistic information, news and comments.

In an attempt to provide evidence to test his argument, I want to examine how two factors - the digital transformation of the media sector amid an influx of technology capital, and tightening ideological control since Xi Jinping came into power in 2012 - are reacting with each other to reshape China's journalism landscape, from three aspects: investigative journalism, the so-called "self-media" that has emerged on the WeChat social media platform, which has also become a major news consumption venue for Chinese public, and the party-state's propaganda work.

In the second chapter I will examine the steep decline of investigative journalism, once viewed as the jewel in the crown of the profession. In its heyday, hard-hitting investigative reporting was pursued by journalists aiming to push for institutional changes and hold government to account,

¹² Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and Bottom Line*, University of Illinois Press, 1998

¹³ Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialisation and Authoritarian Rule in China*, Cambridge University Press, 2013

¹⁴ Larry Diamond, "Introduction", *Liberation Technology: Social Media and Struggle for Democracy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012

such as in the case of migrant worker Sun Zhigang's death¹⁵ ¹⁶ and the deadly Sars epidemic.¹⁷ But in a reverse of course, many legacy news organisations have dissolved their investigative reporting teams amid the second wave of media marketisation. Through semi-structured interviews with current and former investigative journalists, I have tried to answer why there is a decline in investigative journalism in legacy media organisations, and could new media offer an alternative solution?¹⁸

The third chapter will focus on the role of social media – examining the case of WeChat's official accounts platform - as a dominating news consumption channel. Latest statistics show China's mobile Internet population is growing at a fast pace,¹⁹ and that they are increasingly reliant on social media as a news consumption venue. The innovative payment feature of Tencent's popular messenger app also creates new business models for content providers, which also leads to proliferation of "self-media". Through a content analysis of the top ten popular articles over a period of 15 days, using third-party data, as well as semi-structured interviews with several operators of WeChat's official accounts, I try to examine whether it offers a venue for pluralistic news, information and comment.

The fourth chapter examines why the Party, instead of the people, is benefiting more from this renewed wave of media marketisation, through offering empirical evidence. For instance, how emerging digital-born news sites, as in the case of thePaper.cn, are helping to boost the credibility

¹⁵ Investigative reports on the death of the migrant worker Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou in 2003, as a result of physical abuse he suffered while being detained under China's custody and repatriation system, sparked a public outcry and activism by legal scholars, which eventually saw the regulation to be abolished in June that year.

¹⁶ David Bandurski and Martin Hala, *Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism*, HKU Press, 2010

¹⁷ Media investigations played a key role in forcing Chinese government to become transparent on the real scale of outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003. (See Reference 14)

¹⁸ Due to the sensitive of the issue, most journalists interviewed for this research would want not to be named, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁹ See Reference 3

of government agencies on controversial and sensitive issues. Meanwhile the CCP is also taking advantage of social media and networking platforms to digitalise its propaganda.

And chapter five offers a brief conclusion of what has been discussed.

CHAPTER 2 CHANGING JOURNALISM PRACTICE: WHERE HAVE ALL THE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS GONE?

During the first wave of media marketisation, which dates back to the 1980s, China's broadcasters and newspapers were made to seek financial self-sufficiency as requested by policies designed by the Chinese Communist Party. In such a process, editors began their pursuit of autonomy by determining what to report and what news products should be produced to meet the needs of readers and audiences, not just the imperatives of the Party.²⁰ In continuous bargaining with censors, they carved out a way for investigative journalism that in some cases succeeded in pushing for institutional changes, as was discussed in the introduction chapter.

China's investigative journalism under an authoritarian regime is theoretically backed by the notion of *Yulun Jiandu* (舆论监督) or "supervision by public opinion". It supports the idea that the media represent the public (or the "masses") and should monitor the government with critical reporting. The first official endorsement of the concept appeared in a political report delivered by liberal-minded former Premier Zhao Ziyang in 1987.²¹

Subsequent leadership, including former Premier Zhu Rongji and former President Hu Jintao, made public statements in 1998²² and in 2009²³ respectively in support of "supervision by public opinion", and saw critical reporting by the press as a faithful mirror of the Party's deficiencies in progressing reforms and reducing corruption.

Investigative journalism flourished under such a background, and albeit still under supervision by government agencies, commercial media outlets have learned to push coverage boundaries while

²⁰ See reference 11

²¹ See reference 14

²² Website of People's Daily, retrieved on June 28: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64165/70486/70493/4792271.html>

²³ Hu Jintao's speech at the opening ceremony of World Media Summit in Beijing in October 2009, document from Foreign Ministry website, retrieved on June 28: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/t619228.shtml

toeing the Party's "bottom line". Through reflecting the public voice, they gained increasing credibility among the general public.²⁴

Although scholars such as Daniela argued those conducting critical reporting have functioned as "input institutions" and have helped to stabilise authoritarian rule, making it more responsive to the public without carrying out real political changes, pursuit of investigative journalism at commercially funded media outlets still represented Chinese journalists and editors' boldest attempts to open up social and political debates.

As stated by Bandurski²⁵, China's investigative journalism plays a dual role as an arm of the government and a watchdog press struggling to be free. Investigative journalists also became a respected group among the general public who were vaguely exposed to the Western idea that news media should operate as "the fourth estate". A three-day public demonstration in support of freedom of the press in 2013 could well be a case in point. Supporters gathered outside the headquarters of the Southern Weekly - which used to be a respectful liberal-leaning newspaper based in Guangdong province, protesting after the newspaper's intended New Year message calling for constitutionalism was redacted by censors before publishing.²⁶ The incident might have marked the most defiant challenge against China's news control. But the outspoken newspaper has undergone major personnel reshuffles and has toned down its critical coverage.

But President Xi Jinping, who came into power in 2012, holds a different view to his predecessors. In a meeting on the Party's news and propaganda work in February 2016, he made it clear by stating "supervision by public opinion and positive propaganda are unified".²⁷ That means Xi denied there

²⁴ See reference 12

²⁵ See reference 15

²⁶ Jonathan Kaiman, "China Anti-Censorship Protest Attracts Support across Country", January 7, 2013

²⁷ Xi Jinping's speech at the meeting was given more detailed coverage in a commentary published on magazine *Chinese Journalist*, full article retrieved on June 28:

http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2016-03/14/c_135185092.htm

is any difference between the enterprising muckraking by a watchdog press and the dry political reports by the Party's mouthpieces.

David Bandurski believes this suggests the government under Xi believes critical reporting has grown out of hand over the past two decades as a result of social and technological transformations. What the CCP needs now is to subject media to rigorous Party supervision.²⁸

Disappearing profession

For China's best investigative journalists, the heyday of watchdog journalism has become an increasingly remote past. The past few years have witnessed a surge of dissolving investigative teams at news outlets - both in traditional media and digital-born news sites - due to a number of reasons ranging from cost-cutting, changing news production and consumption habits in the digital age, to tightened media control.

Several veteran Chinese investigative journalists interviewed for this research said that enterprising investigative reporting currently "exists in name only".

According to an assessment by Shen Yachuan, who has over 15 years' experience on investigating journalism in China's law and order sector, *Caixin Magazine* and *The Beijing News* are now the only two media outlets that are still doing quality investigative reports on a regular basis comparable to the profession's golden eras.

Other media outlets - both State-owned and more commercial non-official ones - which used to be known for their hard-hitting reports, have either abandoned their investigative reporting pages or replaced them with feature-style stories.

Wang Keqin, arguably one of the most respected investigative journalists in China, was laid off by his employer *China Economic Times*, a newspaper sponsored by the Development Research Center of the State Council, in July 2011. The investigative reporting team he oversaw was disbanded at the

²⁸ David Bandurski, "Under Xi, the media has turned from a 'mouthpiece of masses' to the Party's parrot", Hong Kong Free Press, June 21, 2016

same time. He later joined another financial weekly, *The Economic Observer*, as an assistant to editor-in-chief to continue his endeavour in investigative journalism. But by August 2012, the newly formed investigative reporting team under Wang had already been dissolved, and Wang left the newspaper in March 2013.²⁹

The dissolving of investigative journalism teams at Chinese media outlets has accelerated since the beginning of 2013, when *Southern Weekly*, which used to be one of China's most outspoken newspapers, was punished for its defiant demands for more editorial autonomy.

In subsequent years, at least six influential publications (two national and four regional) have dissolved their investigative reporting teams, or have had their special task-forces merged with other teams, resulting in reduced production of investigative journalism.

The following is a timeline of newsroom changes with their investigative reporting teams being dissolved:

- *China Economic Times* (中国经济时报) July 2011
- *Economic Observer* (经济观察报) 2013 ³⁰
- *21st Century Business Herald* (21世纪经济报道) September 2014 ³¹

²⁹ Media report retrieved on June 28:

http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmymj/xjh/201303/t20130301_359385.htm

³⁰ Media report retrieved on June 28:

http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmymj/xjh/201210/t20121010_357832.htm

³¹ According to author's interview with one former employer at the newspaper. *Southern Weekly*, *21st Century Business Herald*, and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* are all members of Southern Media Group, headquartered in southern city of Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province. It is one of the most liberal-minded and outspoken media group, thanks to the relatively relaxed media control in one of China's most open provinces.

- *Beijing Times* (京华时报) May 2015³²
- *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年报) May 2015, replacing investigative reporting team with a special team to take ad-hoc news assignments³³
- *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (南方都市报) March 2015
- *China Business News* (华商报) December 2015

This is by no means a complete list. Organisational changes within newsrooms are usually not made public. The six newspapers listed above are among the most influential in China, with a track record of practicing hard-hitting investigative journalism. Changes at these organisations touch a nerve with Chinese journalists so they were reported. There are also other unreported or more subtle changes at other news organisations. For instance, two of the most well-known investigative news programmes at the State broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) - Focus Report and News Probe - have lost their critical edge, according to the author's interview with journalists.³⁴ CCTV pledged "absolute loyalty" to the Communist Party when president Xi Jinping toured the media in Feb 2016.³⁵

Some Chinese media watchers argue that the disappearance of investigative reporting teams in traditional media outlets - newspaper and televisions - are part of a natural course of dwindling influence of traditional media, and that the resulting vacuum will be filled by emerging digital born news platforms³⁶.

³² The newspaper stopped publication from Jan 1, 2017, and was merged into another local newspaper Beijing Morning Post.

³³ Media report retrieved on June 28:

http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmyj/jdzt/201505/t20150527_366846.htm

³⁴ Author's interview with one journalist dated May 31, 2017.

³⁵ Zhuang Pinghui, "China's top party mouthpieces pledge 'absolute loyalty' as president makes rare visit to newsrooms", South China Morning Post, February 29, 2016

³⁶ Ye Tiegiao, "Ending of Traditional Investigative Journalism and Opening of a New Form", Nanfang Media Research, July 2016, retrieved on June 28:

http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmyj/jdzt/201505/t20150527_366846.htm

This claim seemed to be true for a short period of time. China's major online news portals, ran by commercial, profit-driven IT companies, such as Sina.com, Tencent.com, Sohu.com, Netease (163.com), and Phoenix, have all expanded their original news reporting to attract readers, including building special investigative journalism channels, such as Sohu's *People in the News* (新闻当事人), Tencent's *Prism* (棱镜) and *News Probe* (探针), as well as Netease's *Road Sign* (路标).

Their products differ from investigative journalism in traditional news outlets in terms of topics, lengths and forms of presentation. Stories are more focused on society and people's livelihoods, avoiding harsh criticisms of governments or pushing for institutional changes, and much shorter compared to the long-form investigative reports that used to be published by magazines and newspapers, in a bid to better adapt to changes in news consumption habits on laptops or mobile phones. They also come with more photos, videos and infographics.

But they're also more vulnerable in terms of tightened media control. After a crackdown by China's cyber regulators in July 2016³⁷, Tencent's original news reporting channel Prism, which specialises in in-depth and investigative financial reporting, is the only one that has survived so far.

A few other digital-born news sites, such as ThePaper.cn(澎湃), Red Star(红星新闻) and Jiemian.com(界面新闻), have government-backed funders, and also occasionally produce in-depth and investigative reports. They have gained popularity as well as trust among the public. Meanwhile, government agencies are also taking advantage of the public trust of these platforms and using them as new channels for spreading information. (There will be more discussion on this point in Chapter 4)

Tightening control

All journalists interviewed for this research agreed that government censorship and increasingly tight ideological control since 2012 is the ultimate reason for a rapid decline in China's investigative journalism, but they also pointed to the failing business model of traditional print media and an exodus of talented journalists amid the business boom of the tech sector.

³⁷ Michael Forsythe, "China Clamps Down on Online News Reporting", *New York Times*, July 25, 2015

The model of “cross-regional supervision”, under which media outlets conducting investigative reporting in other provinces or municipalities so sparking nationwide debates, is no longer possible.

China’s media regulations explicitly banned “cross-regional supervision” in 2004³⁸ in a policy document. But such watchdog journalism was still in existence for a prolonged period of time because the central government needed to leverage the power of media to rein in local governments, some of whom created social conflicts and even threatened the authority of the central leadership when pursuing their own interests. Such a power dynamics was defined by scholars as “fragmented authoritarianism”.³⁹

But the ban was reinstated in the run up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, a key political event that ushered in the new generation leaders of the CCP. In December 2011, the provincial party committee of Hubei in central China issued a policy document forbidding local media outlets from carrying out “cross-regional supervision”, following a national meeting of propaganda officials, suggesting this could be a nationwide order.

“It dealt a heavy blow to the investigative journalism, making it virtually impossible to publish investigative reports or with the reports censored immediately after being published... It seemed to be a natural and wise decision for editors to abandon investigative journalism altogether if you cannot publish the stories,” said one veteran investigative journalist who left the industry.

However, the impact of the ban has not been universal. “The survival of investigative reporting at Caixin magazine and The Beijing News largely benefited from the political connections and resources they have,” said Shen Yafei.⁴⁰

Business model collapsing for legacy media

However, media gag orders are nothing new to Chinese journalists. “Dancing with shackles” has been a motto for many who work in China’s tightly controlled media sector but who want to make

³⁸ Zhan Jiang, “Supervision by Public Opinion in China”, *FT Chinese*, October 9, 2009

³⁹ Xia Qianfang, Yuan Guangfeng, “Division of the State, Internet Control and Opportunities for Reporting on Social Conflicts”, *Open Times*, Vol 1, 2014, retrieved on June 28:

<http://www.opentimes.cn/bencandy.php?fid=373&aid=1790>

⁴⁰ Author’s interview dated May 31, 2017.

a difference. Yet why is investigative journalism losing its resilience in the second wave of marketisation? The following part is a summary of findings from interviews.

Investigative reporting is the most resource-intensive and time-consuming project for newsrooms. It was an investment in a media outlet's reputation and credibility, rather than bringing in direct economic benefits, interviewees said. Collapse of print media's traditional business model, due to challenges posed by online news portals and social media, have worsened the prospects of investigative journalism.

In China, virtually all the legacy media - whether official news outlets or commercial publications - are still under government supervision. Each commercial news organisation is overseen by government bodies or government affiliated institutions. Some are also partially funded by their supervisors. In the face of challenges by new media, some legacy news organisations ran into operational difficulties, and became increasingly dependent on government. In one case, print media had to rely on a financial bailout from local government, making it impossible to carry out any investigative reporting.⁴¹

The failing businesses at legacy media outlets, and on the other hand, the booming of new media, have also led to a massive exodus of experienced investigative journalists, who are a critical asset for newsrooms that take years to foster but can be easily lost, interviewees said. Reflecting such changes, some Chinese journalists have criticised an obvious slide in the quality of news reporting when a cruise ship overturned in the middle reaches of Yangtze River on June 1, 2015, killing 442 people, mostly pensioners. They lamented that coverage focused on search and rescue efforts by the People's Liberation Army, while few were asking questions about the reasons behind the tragedy.

New media not able to fill the vacuum

Chinese investigative journalists are faced with similar challenges to their Western counterparts: a proliferation of information technologies and new media platforms are changing news consumption and news production. News cycles are shortened, as is the public's attention span. But meanwhile journalists are also quickly adapting to the age of digital journalism, finding the Internet gives their

⁴⁰ See reference 38⁴¹

exposés a wider audience reach, even though that means their intellectual property is not always properly protected.⁴²

The bigger problem is, despite the deep pockets of the technology companies, popular digital media platforms, however, are not able to fill the vacuum left by the legacy media in investigative journalism, for the following reasons:⁴³

Those technology companies who have full or partial control in media outlets - some of them are publicly listed - are fundamentally driven by business profits. Although they have abundant wealth, their willingness, capacity, as well as social and political resources to produce envelope-pushing stories in the public interest are more limited than traditional media.

“These tech capitals, their ultimate goal is making profit. They hold shares in media assets mainly in exchange for benefits in public relations and government relations. Pushing for greater space for free speech is not in their interests” one interviewee said.

The three largest ICT companies in China - Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent - to some extent benefited from China’s cyberspace control policies, because similar Western services from Google, Facebook and Twitter, are blocked. Their business boomed from protectionism, which also made them less likely to challenge government decisions.⁴⁴

Alibaba’s takeover of the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post is the most discussed case. The e-commerce giant’s executives said the purchase was fueled by “a desire to improve China’s image and offer an alternative” to what it called the “biased lens of Western news outlets”, raising fears that the newspaper would toe a more pro-Beijing line.⁴⁵ Months later, the newspaper’s editorial independence ran into further questions when it published an interview with legal activist Wei Zhao

⁴² Author’s interview with a journalist dated May 28 and 29, 2017

⁴³ Author’s interview with journalists dated May 28, 29, 31 and June 3, 2017

⁴⁴ See reference 9

⁴⁵ David Barboza, “Alibaba Buying South China Morning Post, Aiming to Influence Media”, *New York Times*, December 11, 2015

upon her release from prison. In the interview Zhao denounced her former activities in a style of self-confessions that only previously seen in State-controlled news organisations.⁴⁶

Media outlets also sometimes find themselves in a conflict of business interests with their cash-rich owners. One interviewee admitted his former employee, a publication under the control of Alibaba, had to self-censor any coverage that might upset the owner.

On the other hand, online news portals, digital born news sites and social media platforms run by private ICT companies face strict regulatory constraints on investigative reporting.

According to China's media and Internet regulations, most online media outlets do not hold a license to publish original news reports, especially those related to current affairs. Yet a few years ago some online news portals still decided to set up original reporting teams in a bid to retain a competitive edge among otherwise homogenous contents.⁴⁷

But they are also more vulnerable to censorship, because as private companies, they usually do not have as many political and social connections to contest the fragmented and nuanced media control in China. ⁴⁸ As mentioned earlier, legacy media outlets are under supervision by government agencies or affiliated institutes, these ties bringing them political and social resources and empowering them in bargaining between central and local governments and the general public, or "the masses". But media branches of the ICT companies have yet to accumulate similar power, even though some of IT tycoons are gaining an increasing popularity and influence among the public, or becoming members of China's elite political bodies.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shanthi Kalathi, *Beyond the Great Fire Wall*, Centre for International Media Assistance, March 2017

⁴⁷ A list of them is provided in the previous part of this chapter.

⁴⁸ See Reference 38

⁴⁹ Jack Ma of Alibaba has become a heavyweight among the general public, his speeches at business events are always widely spread online. Tencent's chief Ma Huateng has been a deputy to the National People's Congress, China's legislature body since 2013. Baidu's chief Li Yanhong has been a member to the country's top political advisory body since 2013.

Editorial staff at these online news media outlets are also usually less experienced in judging the risks of being censored. One interviewee said: "It's a shame that this has become one of the criteria to judge how experienced editors and reporters are. But in order to get the message across in China, one needs to learn to live with the constraints."

Meanwhile, it is usually hard to build up a reputation and credibility in a short period of time for these digital born news products. Therefore, the state pays a much smaller price - public complaints and criticisms - when censoring or completely shutting them down. One interviewee noticed when China Youth Daily's four-page weekly supplement *Freezing Point* was temporarily shut down by the government in early 2016, it sparked a nationwide outcry.⁵⁰ But when its digital investigative reporting projects were shut down, there were "only some complaints among the journalists."

She summarised the comparison by claiming: "in terms of original investigative reporting, the censorship bears a much smaller 'social cost'".

⁵⁰ Philip P. Pan, "Leading Publication Shut Down in China", *Washington Post*, January 25, 2006

CHAPTER 3 “SELF-MEDIA”: DELUSION OF INFORMATION PLURALISM

Evolving of social media platforms: Weibo and WeChat

Some scholarly views hold that new technologies, especially the home-grown social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, are providing new ways of spreading information and opening up public debates on politically sensitive issues, although Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are inaccessible due to Chinese government blocking.⁵¹

Before a massive crackdown on outspoken opinion leaders by media regulators in August 2013, Sina Weibo - owned by Alibaba - was once an emerging venue for flow of information deemed too politically de-stabilising for the party-state.

Examples documented by previous research include the circulation of scandals linked to disgraced politician Bo Xilai, promotion of Western-style liberal and democratic ideals by celebrity opinion leaders, as well as chronicling efforts to reveal the severity of Beijing’s smog problem by a real-estate tycoon.⁵² Such Twitter-esque posts aroused heated public discussions, and in some cases, forced the government to introduce policy changes in response to public sentiment, despite the fact that censorship measures - post deletion and account suspension - were in place.

Diamond argues such ICT tools may help to “widen the public sphere, creating a more pluralistic and autonomous arena of news, commentary and information”, well before social mobilisation for democracy peaks.

Yet the heyday of Weibo came to an abrupt end in August 2013 following a massive crackdown on online “rumours” that saw the detention of several outspoken celebrities and activists, including venture capitalists Wang Gongquan and Charles Xue, among others.⁵³

⁵¹ See reference 5 and 14

⁵² See reference 5

⁵³ Charles Custer, “The Demise of Sina Weibo: Censorship or Evolution?” *Forbes*, February 4, 2014

China's cyberspace regulator subsequently published "seven base lines" for all Internet users to uphold the "socialist system" and "national interests".⁵⁴ Weibo intensified its censorship, introducing in-house "Internet police" working jointly with public security bureaus.⁵⁵

Users also accused the platform of manipulating timelines so that posts with political sensitive information or accounts critical of authorities were given a lower chance of being exposed to their followers. They also complained that Weibo manipulated the rankings of the most searched topics to distract users in cases of breaking news.

The result was a reduced user activity on Weibo since the 2013 crackdown, which also partially contributed to the increased popularity of a WeChat feature: its public accounts platform.⁵⁶ Weibo gradually rebuilt its popularity by wooing entertainment celebrities and promoting consumerism.⁵⁷

WeChat started as a messenger app in 2011, but it has evolved into an all-in-one mobile phone app within a few years, and accumulated 889.3 million monthly active users by the end of 2016, with 33.9 per cent of them spending over four hours a day on the app.⁵⁸

It first introduced its official accounts platform (微信公众号平台) as a marketing tool in 2012, which allows both individual users and companies to publish articles in the form of blog posts and push them to subscribers' accounts. Media outlets, both State-owned and commercial, as well as government agencies all jumped on this bandwagon as a way of promoting their stories and increasing their influence among the audience, in a similar way to how media outlets in the West took to Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat to engage with audiences.

⁵⁴ See reference 53

⁵⁵ See reference 8

⁵⁶ See reference 53

⁵⁷ John Gapper, "China's Internet is Flourishing inside the Wall", *Financial Times*, November 23, 2016

⁵⁸ See reference 2

In 2017, there are already over 10 million official accounts; about 1.8 per cent have more than one million followers⁵⁹. And WeChat has gradually become a major news publishing platform and consumption venue. Latest statistics show that China now has 731 million Internet users and 95 per cent access from mobile phones.⁶⁰ And about 74 per cent of mobile Internet users said they consume news through WeChat. (See Figure 1)

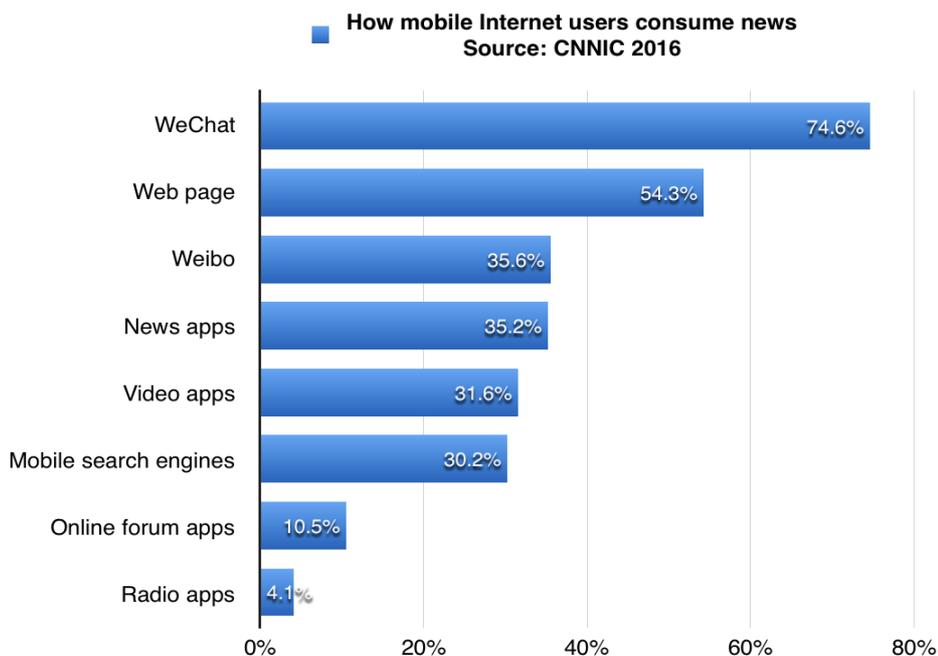


Figure 1

“Self-media”, or individuals and small, independent startups who operate official accounts on WeChat’s publishing platform, began to emerge amid its increasing popularity. In the early years of the platform, these accounts offered “more in-depth material and more diverse viewpoints” than traditional media.⁶¹

Trying to answer the question, whether this platform, now also a major source of news consumption in China, has helped to “widen the public sphere, creating a more pluralistic and autonomous arena

⁵⁹ See reference 2

⁶⁰ See reference 3

⁶¹ Jason Q. Ng, “Politics, Rumors, and Ambiguity: Tracking Censorship on WeChat’s Public Accounts Platform”, CitizenLab, July 2015

of news, commentary and information”, this research first looked at what are the most widely consumed news-related articles through a content analysis. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with official accounts authors, in a bid to shed light on how WeChat’s business models are influencing information providers.

The content analysis was conducted to discover what is the mostly consumed information on WeChat public accounts platform and who provides it, by examining daily the ten most popular articles under the category of “current affairs” between May 25 and June 9, 2017, based on statistics provided by the third-party data analytics company NewRank.cn.⁶²

NewRank.cn now collects data on more than 410,000 official accounts. The ranking is calculated by the company based on the times an article is viewed, liked and reposted. Limitations of this content analysis lie in the accuracy of the data. Neither WeChat nor NewRank release detailed data regarding page-views when one post is viewed over 100,000 times. There are reports claiming that some official accounts’ readership is inflated to attract advertisers.⁶³ Also, it must be pointed out that while the contents of the daily top 10 most popular posts may be able to suggest a general trend of what mainstream WeChat users read, this content analysis obviously is not able to provide a full picture of all articles published on WeChat’s official account platform.

Content Analysis Results

Six public accounts are the dominant publishers of the most read articles. Among 150 most popular posts, 72, or 48 per cent, were published by WeChat accounts of the three largest official news providers: People’s Daily (65), the Party’s mouthpiece, the State news agency Xinhua(4), and the State broadcaster CCTV News (3). Another 75 were published by three “individual accounts”: Zhan Hao 占豪 (31), Fengzhanzhang Zhijia 冯站长之家 (32) and Jinri Pingshuo 今日平说 (12).

⁶² WeChat does not publish data of its official account platform. NewRank.cn publishes of daily rankings of popular posts, accounts on the platform in collaboration with Fudan University’s journalism school, one of the leading journalism institutes in China. It started to publish monthly and annual ranking of the most popular WeChat official accounts in 2015.

⁶³ Zen Soo, “Tencent Cracks Whip on WeChat users inflating readership numbers”, *South China Morning Post*, September 30, 2016

- People's Daily (O)
- Xinhua News Agency (O)
- CCTV News (O)
- Chongqing Morning Post (O)
- Fengzhanzhang Zhijia (N)
- Zhan Hao (N)
- Jinri Pingshuo (N)
- Jindachui Anpai (N)
- Tiexue Junshi (N)

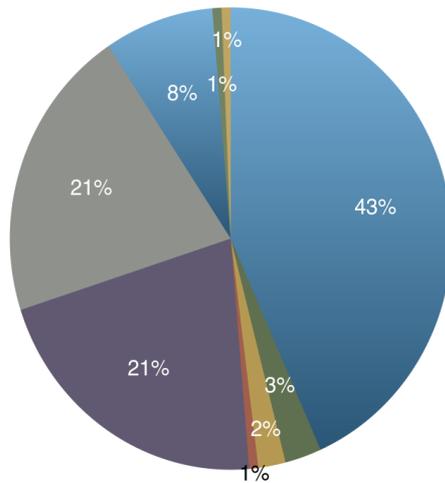


Figure 2

Another two per cent was published by Chongqing Morning Post, a regional newspaper's public account, Tiexue Junshi (铁血军事), a popular military forum, and Jindachui Anpai (金大锤暗拍), a video-sharing account, as shown in Figure 2.

This shows that among the most influential publishers of news-related information on WeChat official account platform, State-owned news outlets occupy just less than half (49 per cent), while non-official "individual accounts" - or self-media - have a slightly higher share of 51 per cent.

Who are the authors behind these popular self-media accounts? There is some publicly available information:

Jinri Pingshuo, which translates as Ping's Daily Comments, is ran by Zhou Xiaoping, a controversial online blogger who won praise from Chinese president Xi Jinping on his "spreading positive energy" in 2014, though critics say his articles frequently contain misinformation and illogical arguments.

Author Zhao Hao first rose to popularity among Chinese Internet users for his opinions on how to invest in China's volatile markets in 2000s, but has switched to write about international relations

with a focus on boasting of China’s coming of age on the international stage. He has published seven books on these topics since 2008.

Fengzhanzhang Zhijia, is owned by Feng Guozhen, whose full-time job is an information security specialist at Anbang Insurance Group. He started operating the “self-media” account on WeChat in 2014 to offer daily news aggregation and comments, after a website he set up for his university alumni gaining popularity.

What are these official accounts - both by official news agencies or individuals - posting? Are they offering more pluralistic sources of news in addition to the official party lines? This research also looks into the contents of their 150 posts.

They fall into the following categories: factual news reporting from authoritative news sources; commentary pieces boasting of military prowess and loyalty to the People’s Liberation Army; commentary pieces boasting ‘made-in-China’ strengths, mainly infrastructure and science breakthroughs; commentary pieces about foreign affairs, from chaos in the Middle East countries to strong-worded criticisms of neighbours; commentary pieces defending Government economic policies; motivational and lifestyle essays; hot social topics of the day and advertisements. Figure 3 shows who posted what.

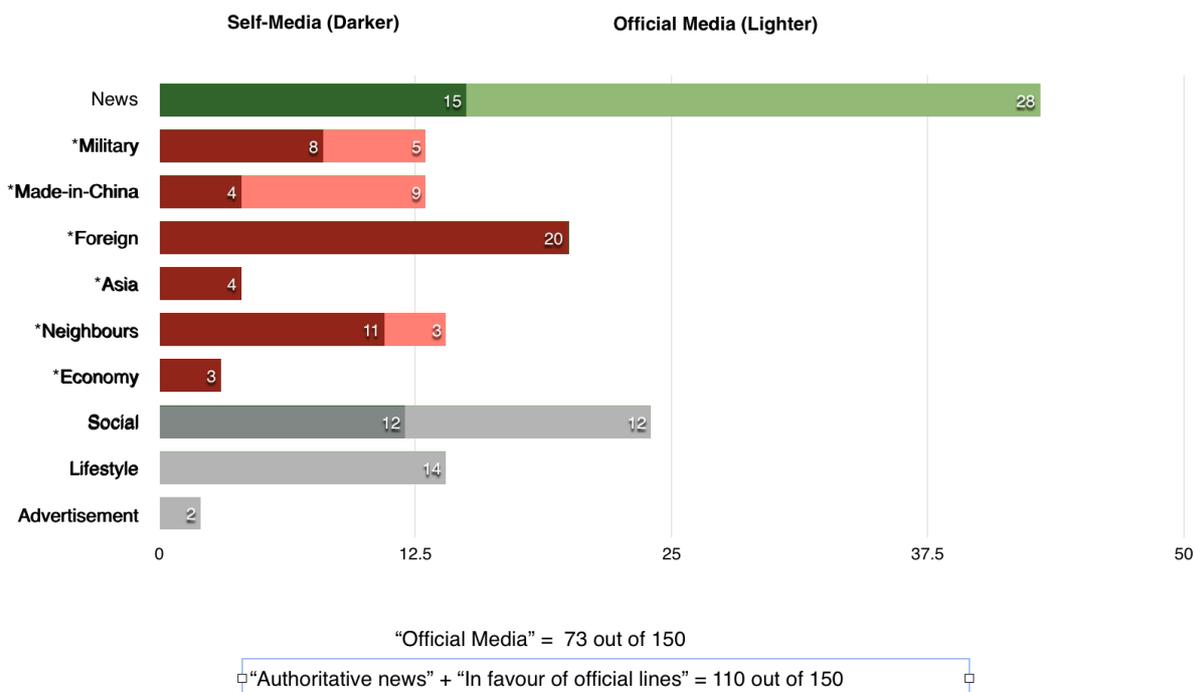


Figure 3

The content analysis shows that news articles original published by authoritative sources - or the legacy media - are reposted on WeChat platform by both official and self-media accounts. In fact, Fengzhanzhang Zhijia took advantage of sharing news headlines every day at around 7 o'clock every morning, accumulating - an estimate - of over 770,000 subscribers.⁶⁴

The most popular articles on WeChat's platform usually have catchy and provocative headlines - some even suggesting conspiracy theories - to boost views and shares. Commentary pieces - published both by official media and self-media - are in favour of official lines, while some of them show an obvious tendency to shore up patriotism, nationalism, and even hatred. There was also no lack of misinformation and illogical argument in these widely read articles.

For instance, one of headlines by Zhan Hao on Qatar's diplomatic crisis on June 8, 2017 reads: "Trump, the behind-the-scene black hand of Qatar crisis." And another article by the same author on May 28, 2017 sought to belittle India's development with the headline "The tax on sanitary pads that tells you the real difference between China and India."

This research also found an increasingly visible tendency of nationalism displayed in commentary pieces on foreign affairs, from relatively detached descriptions of what was happening in the Middle East, through more contemptuous comments about failings in other Asian countries - such as India and Philippines, to somewhat hateful criticisms about neighbouring countries and regions, particularly South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In addition to the two examples above, Fengzhanzhang Zhijia ran a piece on June 4 criticising South Korea's new president Moon Jae-in's defence policies - mostly the country's decision to deploy THAAD⁶⁵ - with racist language. The article finished by calling for Chinese to continue boycotting

⁶⁴ Estimated data by Newrank.cn.

⁶⁵ China was infuriated after South Korea agreed to counter North Korean missile capabilities in collaboration with the United States with an advanced system, called the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, on Korean peninsula. China believed the move was aimed at containing itself. Some Chinese launched a campaign to boycott Korean products.

Korean products. The same account ran another piece on June 8 questioning South Korea's motives, although it had decided to suspend the THAAD deployment for an environmental review.⁶⁶

While self-media accounts are the dominating publishers of commentary pieces on foreign affairs - they published 35 out of 38 articles - the official media also weighed in when China's neighbours are involved. For instance, the People's Daily published a commentary on June 5 entitled "A fall out with Russia and China? South Korea needs a sober mind." It also criticised the new Korean president's decision on THAAD.

Both self-media and official media took advantage of calendar events, such as the traditional dragon boat festival and national university entrance exams, to garner public attention by publishing what was categorised in this research as "hot social topics of the day". Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the People's Daily almost monopolised publishing of motivational and 'chicken-soup-for-the-soul' style articles among the most read pieces. On average one such article made it into daily top ten during the 15-day period during which this content analysis was conducted. This suggests that the Party's mouthpiece, a newspaper better known for its propaganda-style contents full of CCP political jargon, is trying to woo the public with a softer image on social media - and the approach seems to have worked.

These two categories - social and lifestyle - together with the advertisements, are less ideological and largely non-political. The number of them totalled 40.

That means 110 out of 150 articles that are most read, shared and liked by WeChat users are either news from authoritative sources, or in favour of official lines, taking up 73.3 per cent.

Discussion

Results from this research show that articles with provocative headlines, conspiracy theories, and those praising China's achievements are attracting views and shares.

⁶⁶ Even though South Korean president decided to suspend the deployment, he was still criticised for not scrapping it.

Zhou Xiaoping, operator of Jinri Pingshuo, won the recognition of Chinese president Xi Jinping as a popular blogger who was dedicated to “spread positive energy”.⁶⁷ In his posts, Zhou’s China is a country under threat from inside and outside, culturally and existentially, a great nation misunderstood and belittled by its own people. In one of his posts dated June 8, he told his subscribers “it is time to say Goodbye to the Apple phones”, because Chinese apps such as Weibo and WeChat are being discriminated in the iOS system.

So, besides such jingoist and nationalist views being spread, are WeChat official accounts offering a more pluralistic and autonomous venue for public discourses?

A clear trend is that State-owned media, party and government controlled accounts are consciously promoting their accounts and increasing their presence and influence on WeChat’s platform. According to statistics by the New Rank, three accounts ran by the government - People’s Daily, CCTV News and the Chinese Communist Party - made to the top 20 most popular accounts in 2015, the first year the statistics was available. In 2016, two more were added to the list. They were accounts ran by People.cn and CCTV Financial News. In May 2017, the number has increased to eight.

WeChat is also obviously bending its publishing rules for government-controlled accounts, a practice giving them an advantage over self-media operators. For instance, the People’s Daily published 198 times in May, according to NewRank.cn data. That translates to an average of at least five times per day, while self media accounts could only publish once every day. The fact that advertisements from an account ran by the Xinhua News Agency made it twice to top 10 most popular posts in the content analysis also demonstrates a rule-bending practice, as WeChat usually suspends accounts that publish contents enticing users to repost advertisements.

Envelope pushing authors

Among the 10 million official accounts that publish on WeChat are boundary-pushing authors - some of whom are former journalists - who are dedicated to publishing information or comments that are outside of the official lines. Though their impact can never rival those ran by State media and those self media accounts toeing a tight government line, they offer a dissenting voice to the

⁶⁷ Giorgio Strafella, Daria Berg, “A Decade of Blogging in China”, *China Policy Institute: Analysis*, August 31, 2015

party orthodoxy to a smaller group audience who sympathise with their points of view. But these accounts are usually susceptible to government crackdown.

Wang Yongzhi, who publishes under the alias “Wang Wusi”, is an epitome of such authors who plays the game of cat-and-mouse with censors, striving to make his voice heard on WeChat’s platform, despite occasional harassments by state authorities. His witty and acerbic social criticisms have won him thousands of loyal fans, but irritate the internet censors. More than a dozen of Wang’s official accounts have been closed down by censors over the past few years, and he had had to register a new account each time. Most of the articles he published only survived for a few hours online before they were removed. At its peak, he had more than 50,000 fans but each time his account was closed, he lost all the fans and had to start all over again.⁶⁸

Chinese internet censors also keep changing the rules and regulations for social media platforms to discipline users, since authorities realise they could endanger political stability.⁶⁹

Previous studies have well documented censorship on WeChat. This research aims to describe the latest policy changes in 2017.

Starting June 1, 2017, in a statement published online, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) said the new rules would “strengthen management of information” and “promote the healthy and orderly development of internet news, in accordance to law”.⁷⁰

Organisations that do not have a license will not be allowed to post news or commentary about the government, economy, military, foreign affairs, or other areas of public interest. The list of providers and platforms covered includes “websites, applications, forums, blogs, microblogs, public accounts,

⁶⁸ Wang Yongzhi’s interview with China Digital Times on September 21, 2016, Retrieved on June 28, 2017: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2016/09/%E4%BA%BA%E7%89%A9live-%E7%8E%8B%E4%BA%94%E5%9B%9B%EF%BC%9A%E6%88%91%E4%B8%8D%E5%AE%B3%E6%80%95-%E6%88%91%E4%BB%8E%E6%9D%A5%E6%B2%A1%E5%81%9A%E9%94%99%E8%BF%87%E4%BB%80%E4%B9%88/>

⁶⁹ See reference 60

⁷⁰ Xinhua News Agency provided detailed explanations on how new rules will be implemented in May: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/09/c_1120939924.htm

instant messaging tools and internet broadcasts". Only publicly funded organisations will be able to carry out their own reporting.

Such a strict licensing system was already applied to digital investigative projects as discussed in the previous chapter. It could also be easily duplicated to all online publishing form and ensure only news and information from approved sources are published.

Multilayered censorship under the new business model for content publishing

Through interviewing official account operators, this research sought to highlight that tightening government rules, and the business model of WeChat have built up a three-layered censorship mechanism that decentralises information policing and encourages self-censorship.

The government policy makers and company enforcers comprise the first two layers, which have both been well documented and researched by scholars.⁷¹ The third layer, a business environment that encourage authors to censor themselves, however, has hardly been explored.

Several official account operators who have been interviewed for this research admitted they would take into account possible damage to their accounts, particularly their financial income, and would choose not to publish information that they believe would upset censors, and even the audience.

The fast growth in mobile payment in China, especially Alipay ran by Alibaba and WeChat Pay, has fostered a habit of paying for contents. About 57 per cent of WeChat users say they are willing to pay for contents and information, with 4.1 per cent saying they are willing to pay more than 500 yuan (57.3 GBP) per month.⁷²

Official accounts authors have several ways of getting paid for the contents they provide: users can send monetary "tips" for single articles they enjoy reading.⁷³ Some of the authors have also set up

⁷¹ See reference 9

⁷² See reference 2

⁷³ WeChat's official accounts platform used to have a "tipping" function, but had to disable it as Apple sees it is equivalent to in-app purchases and demands a 30 per cent taxation. But readers could still do so by scan author's QR code and make direct payment transfer.

exclusive subscription groups, which require subscribers to pay a fee to join and read their articles; still, some others offer paid online or off-line courses.

Account operators who have a large number of followers are also approached by advertisers to publish advertisements in return for generous payment. Dozens of former journalists have made themselves popular and rich by quitting their previous jobs and running such official accounts. Ma Ling, who worked for 12 years at a Guangzhou-based newspaper Southern Metropolitan Daily, now runs the official account Mi Feng (咪蒙). She claims to have over eight million subscribers and charges as much as 280,000 yuan (GBP32,000) for a single placement of an advertisement.⁷⁴

Popular accounts also attract venture capitalists who want to cash in on their followers, several accounts on entertainment news were valued at about several hundred million yuan.⁷⁵

Some would argue such business models encourage authors to improve content quality to secure a higher income. Yet several official accounts operators interviewed for this research admit they would avoid sensitive political and social topics to avoid their accounts being suspended, or even closed down, because their income hinges on the number of followers they have and on the number of views of their articles. It is especially true for full-time authors like Mi Meng, because too much is at stake.

As part of its moderation policy, WeChat also encourages users to report or “complain” about any posts they see as inappropriate for the public. WeChat will delete the article if it receives a large amount of complaints, and authors normally do not have the leverage to bargain with moderators on such decisions. One interviewee said she decided to withhold an article criticising China’s over-fishing activity because a similar post was censored by WeChat following users’ complaints.

Another interviewee said his account publishes only on financial news and investment tips to avoid trouble.

74 Mi Meng's interview with GQ Chinese on March 14, 2017, retrieved on June 28, 2017
http://www.gq.com.cn/magazine/news_17g497b3b931acd8.html

⁷⁵ *Dushe Dianying*, a popular WeChat official account publishing film critics, was valued at 300 million yuan, according to report by 36kr.com in July 2016. Retrieved on July 25, 2017:
<https://36kr.com/p/5049754.html>

“The prosperity of WeChat’s official accounts platform gives the public a false fantasy that they enjoy freedom of speech. The business models and tightening censorship reinforce each other as ‘carrot and stick’ to force self-media accounts to discipline themselves,” said the interviewee, who was one of China’s top investigative journalist but moved into a new media startup a few years ago.

Almost all interviewees said entertainment offers one of the rare “safe zones” for WeChat official account authors and investors, yet a government crackdown in early June 2017 has seen dozens of accounts publishing celebrity gossips, film reviews and entertainment news being shut down for spreading “vulgar and kitsch sentiments”.⁷⁶

This development shows the government wants to take full control of online discourses and allow only those could “actively promote socialist values” in order to create a “healthy, uplifting environment for mainstream opinion.”⁷⁷

It is worth noticing that the research was conducted between January and June of 2017, and was not able to cover more censorship developments afterwards.

⁷⁶ Eleanor Ross, “China Extends Internet Crackdown with Ban on Celebrity Gossip”, *Newsweek*, June 13, 2017

⁷⁷ See reference 73

CHAPTER 4 PROPAGANDA DIGITISATION

The Chinese government sees cyberspace as a crucial battlefield for ideological and social control. The guiding principal was laid out by Xi Jinping at a national meeting with propaganda chiefs in August 2013. He said the Communist Party should be combative to ensure the internet is “manageable and controllable”, and that cyberspace is “clean”. He ordered the propaganda apparatus to wage a war to win over public opinion, to make full use of new media technologies and to seize the “commanding point” in information dissemination.⁷⁸

Xi further broadened his idea of internet order in a speech delivered to the second World Internet Conference in December 2015 in China. He said “moral teachings” are essential and cyberspace needs to be “nourished” and “rehabilitated” using the accomplishments of human civilisation.⁷⁹ The message he delivers was government should actively feed the internet with orthodox contents.

The messages he delivered were translated into a clear shift in China’s cyberspace control strategy: from passively responding to contents generated by users to a more proactive feeding of orthodox information into internet so as to make the Party’s voice dominant in cyberspace.

As noted in the previous chapter, not only was there was a crackdown on online opinion leaders through ‘rumour-cleansing’ campaigns, State-owned news organisations and government agencies also went all out to increase their online presence and impact. According to data from NewRank.cn, the number of government-controlled official WeChat accounts (including both State media and government or party organisations) among the top 20 most popular accounts have increased from 3 in 2015 to 8 in May 2017.

China’s propaganda apparatus, government agencies and Party institutes also begin to tap into new media for propaganda outlets in a bid to win the minds and hearts of younger generations and overseas audiences.

⁷⁸ Report by [thePaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn), retrieved on June 28, 2017: http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1427055_1

⁷⁹ Xi Jinping’s speech at the summit published on Foreign Ministry’s website. Retrieved on June 28, 2017: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1327570.shtml

Although Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked in China, State-owned media agencies including *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, *CCTV* and *China Daily*, as well as State Council Information Office - the cabinet arm of China's propaganda apparatus - among others, all have active presence on these social media platforms, posting English-language only contents. *People's Daily* celebrated its international influence when its Facebook account reached the threshold of ten million followers in November 2015 - the largest number of followers for any print newspaper - and surpassing that of the *New York Times*.⁸⁰

Both State-owned media outlets and government bodies have started experimenting with new voices and new formats to charm the audience, in a departure from the old way of boring speeches and dry slogans.⁸¹ The State Council, or the cabinet, produced a music video in 2015 to promote the social and economic development plans during the 13th Five-year plan period (2016-2020). The Central Communist Youth League collaborated with a group of rappers churning out a music video aimed at debunking Westerners' "wrongful impression" about China.⁸² In promoting Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project - the Belt and Road Initiative, *China Daily* came up with videos explaining the all-encompassing and complex concept through bedtime stories to a five-year-old American girl.⁸³

China's government agencies are also taking advantage of newly emerged digital born news sites as a new venue to disseminate information, and may be benefiting from these news sites' popularity and public trust.

Emerging digital news sites - such as [ThePaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn) (澎湃新闻), *Red Star* (红星新闻) and jiemian.com (界面新闻) - are gradually blurring a decade-old line between official and non-official news media.

⁸⁰ As reported by [people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), the website of *People's Daily*, on November 10, 2015, retrieved on June 28, 2017: <http://www.people.com.cn/n/2015/1110/c393876-27799325.html>

⁸¹ BBC Beijing Bureau, "China's Political Propaganda Gets a Digital Makeover", March 14, 2017

⁸² BBC News, "Party Propaganda Rap Aim to 'Tell Foreigners Truth' about China", June 30, 2016

⁸³ AFP, "Video: China Tells the World Bedtime Stories in Propaganda Drive", May 13, 2017

Their investors include local governments, State-owned enterprises and/or private businesses, including technology companies. For instance, thePaper.cn received total funding of 610 million yuan (70 million GBP) at the end of 2016, all from Shanghai-based State-controlled companies.⁸⁴

Their innovative presentations - website and app designs, visualisations, selection of topics - have soon attracted a lot of public attention. However, the technological innovations do not change the fact that they're operating as "marketed government mouthpieces", as some media watchers have commented.⁸⁵

For instance, ThePaper.cn has been offering local governments a convenient platform to make their voice heard on contentious social issues, publishing government statements in the form of question and answers and marking them as "exclusive interviews" without fact-checking the statements made by government officials.

For instance, some environmental activists have questioned such a practice privately when thePaper.cn published comments made in late 2016 by the Jiangxi Provincial Water Conservation Bureau on the environmental impact of a highly controversial sluice gate project that would disrupt the natural link between the Yangtze River and its largest lake. The news site promoted the statement as "Scoop: Jiangxi authorities responding to questions over the sluice gate project", and failed to cross check the claims made by provincial officials.⁸⁶ The story was published as one of a series reports on the controversial project, mixed among other more critical reporting, and appeared to be more convincing for readers who do not have expertise in the field.

In such cases, few readers would question the credibility of these government statements, which were previously published on government agencies' official websites, usually having a very limited audience reach.

⁸⁴ As reported by *Jiefang Daily*, mouthpiece of Shanghai's municipal Party committee, on December 29, 2016. Retrieved on July 25, 2017: http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2016-12/29/c_129424182.htm

⁸⁵ Xiang Xiaokai, "Commentary: ThePaper is the Opposite End of *Global Times*", on.cc, August 18, 2014

⁸⁶ Liu Chu, Liu Ji, "Scoop: Jiangxi authorities responding to questions over the sluice gate project", ThePaper.cn, November 28, 2016

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

On June 23, 2017, China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television issued an order asking Twitter-like Weibo, online news portal ifeng.com and video streaming platform ACFUN to halt all video and audio streaming services, citing they don't have proper service licenses. Within hours of the ban being issued, shares of the Nasdaq-listed Weibo dropped over 10 per cent in pre-market trading. The company's market capitalisation dropped \$1 billion in a day.⁸⁷

It's a perfect example of how business prospects of these tech firms - and the media platforms they control - are subject to government policy changes.

Grown out of small-and medium-sized startups, these tech firms do not enjoy the same level of government backing and political privilege as State-owned firms do at the moment. They also have much less bargaining power in the policy-making process. These profit-driven companies can be unwilling to leverage their limited bargaining power to push for more public speech and press freedom for the media platforms they control, including but not limited to Weibo, WeChat and other digital news sites.

As the Chinese government continued to tighten censorship over the past few years, technology firms actively embraced such rules for their own survival and prosperity.

Therefore, this second wave of media marketisation, marked by the influx of tech capital, actually saw media gradually losing their status as "policy entrepreneurs" under China's fragmented authoritarianism framework newly gained during the first round of media commercialisation, when editors and journalists were able to pursue stories that matched their growing progressive interests and agendas.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Emily Feng, "Beijing's Video-streaming Ban Lops \$1billion off Sina Weibo Market Cap", *Financial Times*, June 23, 2017

⁸⁸ Andrew Mertha, "'Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0': Political Pluralisation in the Chinese Policy Process", *The China Quarterly*, Volume 200, December 2009

The booming business of technology firms and new media has destroyed the traditional business models of legacy media, particularly print media, dealing a heavy blow to investigative journalism that was the epitome of the media's bargaining power under a fragmented authoritarianism framework. The spread of mobile payment has contributed to the creation of new business models for content creators on social media or digital born content platforms - be it news related comments, film reviews, investment tips, or celebrity gossip.

Furthermore, tightening government censorship and burgeoning content creating businesses backed by technology capital are reinforcing each other, creating an environment that encourages the majority of authors to avoid contents that would challenge the Party's orthodoxy narratives of politics, economic and social issues, and even entertainment discussions. Additionally, those authors and contents that are in favour of the official line are becoming a dominant and mainstream voice online. Non-political contents - for instance entertainment and consumer promos - have flourished, seizing the public attention and creating a sense of information diversity.

Attempts by individuals or groups to diversify the orthodox news and comments are effectively controlled by restrictive licensing. This system, that allows only official media organisations or government approved outlets to publish, could be duplicated for content control when newer forms of media platforms emerge in the future, giving regulators an even tighter grip on outlets for news and information.

In an interview for this research, Professor Philip Howard said China is obviously adapting very quickly and very well to the challenges posed by information and communication technologies for authoritarian control.

The general public in China so far has been generally tolerant of information control, but there are occasional outbursts of grievances over lack of freedom of speech - even though these comments too are quickly censored. Increasing resentment and tightening control by government may put dual pressure on technology firms, which may lead them to disable some social media services, or even divest from the media sector eventually.

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