

## Studying the Internet in China. Relevance of the Topic

China has been the most populated country in the world in terms of Internet users since July 2008 (CNNIC 2008/07), overtaking the US a couple of months ahead of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics Games held in that year.

At the time of writing, China has 731 million Internet users (CNNIC 2017), registering a remarkable and historic growth in terms of both the established infrastructure and citizens involved. In this respect, it is important to note that at the end of 2001 China already had the largest market in terms of mobile communication, overtaking that of the US; this was a particularly important trend that played an even more significant role following the advent of 3G, TD-SCDM and 4G standards.<sup>1</sup>

However, the unprecedented growth in the number of Internet users alone cannot justify the importance of studying the Chinese Internet. Indeed, its development should be set within a more complex social and economic context. Even before China's official entry into the World Trade Organization in September 2001, Internet development in the country was enthusiastically supported by the Chinese government. The former president Jiang Zemin called for a "vigorous" promotion of ITC, supporting the development of Internet services such as email and ecommerce.

In August 2000, during the international computer conference held in China, President Jiang said:

We should deeply recognize the tremendous power of information technology and vigorously promote its development. The speed and scope of its transmission have created a borderless information space around the world. The melding of the traditional economy and information technology will provide the engine for the development of the economy and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Tai 2006: 120)

The development of the Internet infrastructure was promoted by a government that introduced policies to strengthen the national economy, maintaining China's nominal GDP growth rate close to 10% over the past 30 years and confirming its position as the fastest developing economy in the world. The economic context should also be associated with the Internet 'societalizing' characteristic. Indeed, the Internet is different from traditional media such as newspapers, television and broadcasting because it allows the transfer by the state to individuals and groups in society of the power to initiate, send and receive messages (Zheng and Zhang 2009).

### WHY STUDY THE INTERNET IN CHINA

Most scholars share the belief that traditional media such as the radio, newspapers and television have historically been managed differently from new media and the Internet (Zhao 2008; Yang 2006; Zhou 2006; Stockmann 2012). The combination of a more complex management of the media system, the social and cultural context in which most Chinese users grew up—above all young, urban users with a high level of education—and the decentralized structure of the Internet itself have supported the theory of a social change since Internet was introduced in China. In China, several factors greatly influenced the Party-state intervention in public communication and the development of digital technology, and the Internet played a significant role in this context. Before the development of new media and the Internet, the Party-state, propaganda and programs were extremely effective, while it can be argued that the Internet age compromised the Party's monopoly in the public debate, at least in the early stages.

Empirical evidence has already shown that Chinese netizens are more politically opinionated than traditional media users and non-media users (Lei 2011). This dissertation aims to highlight the importance of the Chinese mindset in Internet development in China, avoiding the

perspective of a techno-deterministic society. Despite a series of targeted political and economic plans promoted by the government to support national economic development, benefits are not equally distributed among the Chinese population as is demonstrated by the Gini coefficient (China National Bureau of Statistics 2012).<sup>2</sup> Another aspect that should not be underestimated is the marked rise in the number of so-called Internet mass incidents (Yu 2009; He and Wang 2016).<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that there is still no legal or scientific definition of “mass incidents” (*Qunti Xing Shi Jian* 群体性事件). The expression was used for the first time by Zhou Yongkang, Ministry of Public Security, in 2005 to indicate five trends that “require attention” and that contributed to the growth in the number of incidents between 1994 (when Internet officially arrived in China) and 2004,<sup>4</sup> i.e.:

- The quantitative increase in mass incidents. More than 10,000 cases registered in 1994 while more than 74,000 were officially counted in 2004. The number of citizens involved was 730,000 in 1994 and 3,760,000 in 2004 (less than 1% of the population);
- The local diversification of mass incidents that began to occur not only in urban areas but also in rural places;
- The social category of people involved in mass incidents: “people from various social strata;”
- The extreme methods used to protest against the party and government offices;
- Better organization often supported by the Internet (see Soong 2006).

Analysis of the context as well as the engagement of the Internet population in China cannot be underestimated and needs to be investigated, but first of all it is essential to define the role of *media power* within the context of the Chinese media system, define in what the Chinese Internet differs from the other media and how the Chinese Internet differs from that of the rest of the world.

Both the potential and vulnerability of media systems have been studied before; indeed, Habermas refers to *media power* as a kind of power that can be influenced by, but cannot be placed on the same level as “social, political and economic power” (2006).

It is Habermas again who confirms that media power must be considered limited to the selection of format and information and to the effects

of circulating information itself (2006). Other scholars have highlighted the role of *media power* in the construction of reality (Bourdieu 2001) as well as its contribution to the agenda setting in relation to the establishment of aspiration and identity (Mills 1956). Despite these potential features, *media power* is influenced by economic and political power (Habermas 2006).

The value of *media power* is then dependent on two important relationships: the relationship between the media system and political engagement and the relationship between the media system and existing technology; the latter relationship not only defines the entity of *media power* itself but also the distribution of political power, economic power and media systems and society (Lei 2011). From a theoretical point of view, before the popularization of the Internet, the *mass media* system was characterized by an elite class of intellectuals used to expressing their views through the media, politicians and journalists (Habermas 2006). According to Benkler, the diffusion of the Internet offers the population the possibility to produce and disseminate information (2006). One of the final goals of this research is to evaluate the impact of the development of the Internet—Web 2.0 participatory platforms in particular—on the production and dissemination of online information first and, possibly, on the so-called civil society (*Gongmin Shehui* 公民社会).<sup>5</sup>

### CRUCIAL STEPS PRIOR TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

From a more general point of view, it is possible to argue that despite a series of reforms introduced in the 1970s, the aim of the Chinese media system is still that of supporting the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This trend is well described in Zhao Yuezhi's "Media, market and democracy in China: between the Party line and the bottom line" (1998) and "Communication in China. Political economy, power and conflict" (2008). Most of the traditional media cannot count on the economic support of the Party as they could in the past so their goal is to be economically successful. One of the most important transitions in the Chinese media was the introduction of the dual-track system, which was modeled on the practice of "cause-oriented undertakings managed as business-oriented enterprises" (*Shiye Danwei* 事业单位, *Qiye Guanli* 企业管理. Zhao 2008, p. 77). The term *Shiye* denotes firms that produce public goods and services and are supported by subsidies and favorable tax treatment,

and they differ from the *Qiyè* 企业, firms that provide goods and services but without government subsidies (Lynch 1999, pp. 75–78). The most important historical step in this process dates back to 1979 when advertising in broadcasting was introduced; one year later the press also began to follow this trend, promoting market-oriented sections and “weekend editions.” In the early 1990s the number of business papers and metropolitan dailies mushroomed. The television system became more diversified, too, with new entertainment and lifestyle channels.

Despite this wave of commercialization, the Communist Party still held power and influence over the media system; Shambaugh argues that the CCP still has ultimate control (2007), while Stockmann and Gallagher claim that the new commercialized Chinese media system is actually a tool used by Chinese leaders to wield their power and authority using new propaganda techniques (2011).

To this end, it is important to highlight that the Chinese media commercialization process did not imply the renouncement of a Leninist system in which the CCP authority over the media is the systemic “party principle” or the “party character” (Zhao 1998, p. 19). Leninist ideas regarding the media system first appeared in the Chinese context in July 1912 during the founding congress of the CCP when the first resolutions regarding propaganda were passed:

- Journals, dailies, books and pamphlets must be run by the CCP central executive committee or the provisional executive committee;
- Each locality may publish a trade union journal, a daily, a weekly, a pamphlet or a provisional newsletter as needed;
- All central and local publications must be directly managed and edited by CCP members;
- No central and local publications should publish articles opposing the CCP’s principles, policies and decisions.<sup>6</sup>

Even one of the most reformist political leaders, Hu Yaobang, confirmed in 1985 that “it is absolutely impossible to change the nature of party journalism in the slightest sense and to change its relationship with the CCP.”<sup>7</sup> Other important confirmation came from *Xinhua* Agency, the state press agency of the People’s Republic of China, which in September 2001 ran an editorial that presented the “four no changes” of the CCP related to the market oriented reorganization of the Chinese media system. The article stated that:

- The essence of party's mouthpieces must not be changed;
- The party control's management of the media system must not be altered;
- The party control of editorial teams must be the same;
- The proper orientation toward public opinion must be the same.

The article also confirmed that the CCP would maintain major decision-making power over capital sharing, censorship activities and propaganda as well as the appointment of leading officials.<sup>8</sup>

Following the commercialization of the Chinese media system, the party principle changed into two new forms. The first doctrine identified the CCP as the controller of the media (*Dang Guan Meiti* 党管媒体) providing a distinction between the terms “run” (*Ban* 办) and “control” (*Guan* 管). The CCP does not directly run all the media outlets' activities, but it still controls editorial orientation and the macro-structure of the system. The second doctrine that characterized the post-1989 Chinese media system is the promotion of “correct orientation towards public opinion.” This new media strategy was supported by the former General Secretary of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, and was officially presented in 1996 during a speech given at the *People's Daily* headquarters. The Party was aware that the suppression of hostile voices was no longer sustainable and so the new approach would be oriented toward making the traditional media pillars of the promotion and dissemination of a “correct” voice.

It is no coincidence that the most important steps made to promote the Internet in China were managed by the Jiang Zemin government, one that was focused on strengthening economic growth but also on keeping the nation united. For all these reasons, it can be argued that the development of the Chinese Internet was supported by the wave of media commercialization.

### INTERNET, NASCENT CIVIL SOCIETY AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

As will be discussed later, the development of the Internet differs from that of traditional media.<sup>9</sup> First of all, the Internet cannot be considered a propaganda tool as the television and radio were, since in its early stages it was basically considered a strategic tool for national economic development, while radio and television played a propaganda role right from the start. More in detail, the development of Chinese Internet infrastructure

has to be inserted in a more general framework of an informatization process supported by the central government (Austin 2014). On the other hand, it should be noted that the Internet is still closely controlled. The state still has firm management of the structure, wielding power over Chinese but also foreign companies, which are called on to comply with Chinese regulations. This trend was confirmed by major American companies such as Cisco, which contributed to the establishment of the Golden Shield Project (*Jindun Gongcheng* 金盾工程, also known as the “Great Firewall of China”).<sup>10</sup> In 2005 the journalist Shi Tao was sentenced to 10 years in prison for forwarding a document issued by the Communist party to an overseas Chinese site (for more detailed information see Chap. 3), and two important search engines, Google and Bing, were obliged to filter the “sensitive” results of their searches.

The second difference between traditional media and the Internet in China consists of the interest from outside China; confirmation of this is provided by Google’s decision to redirect their servers in Hong Kong in 2010 (Negro 2010) and the reports in the international press about the role played by the most famous microblog platform, Sina Weibo, after the famous train accident in Wenzhou in 2011. One final important feature of the Internet in China is the possibility users have to express their opinions in anonymous form, becoming a social category that cannot be overlooked.

These three characteristics formed the basis of an evolution in the Chinese civil society (for a literature review on the main characteristics of Chinese civil society see Chap. 4, “Can we talk about a civil society in China?”). The literature can be divided into three different opinions on these issues: one group is optimistic about further development of the Chinese civil society (Zhang 2006; Meng 2009; Yang 2009; Shirk 2010; Qian and Banduski 2011); a second is pessimistic about the role of the Internet in the creation of a civil society, arguing that it is actually a tool to monitor and influence part of the Chinese population (MacKinnon 2010).

Other trends supported by the Internet and that negatively impact Chinese users are the emergent nationalism (Jiang 2012; Breslin and Shen 2010) and the excessive interest in online entertainment (Guo 2005). The third group acknowledges the online engagement of the nascent civil society, but also sees a simultaneous growth of control by the government. The limitation for this third group is to limit the lack of empirical findings (Lagerkvist 2010; Rosen 2010).

Like in other countries, and as will be shown by mapping online habits in China, the Internet not only implies an increase in information from a quantitative point of view, it also supports diversification of sources and content. The development of the Internet in China confirms Castell's theory: the increase in electronic production, exchange and distribution of signals has modified the symbolic power of traditional senders (2010). The success of several bulletin board systems (BBS) and blog platforms first and the engagement of citizens on microblog platforms later changed the sources of public information. Nevertheless, some scholars such as Papacharissi (2002) and Fuchs (2008) reject the reviving power of the Internet in the public sphere for three basic reasons. First, the digital divide and information access imbalances limit full representativeness of the virtual sphere; second, diversification of the online discourse creates niches that usually do not communicate by themselves. Last but not least, the Internet should be considered a public space in which also politically oriented conversation can take place; at the same time the creation of a public sphere cannot be limited to the technology itself.

Most of the academic literature on the public sphere analyzes Western history. The concept of "the public" has its roots in Greek times and its *agora* where citizens exchanged political ideas, but the first concrete development of "public opinion" dates back to the seventeenth century. De Toqueville stresses the involvement of American people in public affairs (1990). The idea of "public" has always been related to the concept of citizenship being accessible by all, contrasting the notion of "not private." At the same time, the idea of a public sphere changed after the advent of the industrial society. Habermas states that the public sphere was established between the seventeenth and eighteenth century and that its decline began in the twentieth and the eighteenth century. The German scholar identified the public sphere as the terrain in which public opinion can stimulate a rational public debate through the formulation of a "rational debate" (1973). It is important to note that the position of Habermas has been criticized; indeed, Fraser pointed out that the German scholar's idea of public sphere had the limit of involving only a small group of men who had the skills to govern, while women and the lower classes were excluded (1992). While Habermas referred to the European context, Fraser propounded her theory with regard to contemporary American public spheres in which some groups complain about their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate and try



to empower their voice in collective identities (*ibid.*). The advent of the Internet can provide some insights to clarify the real role of the public sphere and identify co-existing public spheres online and possibly test the existence of the “rational debate” suggested by Habermas.

Studies on the public sphere focus their analysis on Western countries; only a few scholars have focused on other contexts such as the Chinese one, which is different from the Western one, as will be discussed in Chap. 4. The decentralized structure of the Internet supports utopian perceptions. It has been argued that computer-mediated communication could promote grassroots movements, bringing people all around the world together to form a “diasporic utopia” (Pavlik 1994). On the other hand, the possibility provided by the Internet cannot necessarily be transferred to reality; indeed, it has been pointed out that the technological potential for global communication can be limited by dissimilar cultural backgrounds, providing several cases of miscommunication. The risk of online miscommunication can be caused by fragmentation, which is highly possible especially on Web 2.0 platforms characterized by the long tail<sup>11</sup> and niches (O’Reilly 2005). This theory is not new; the idea of a public sphere that connects many people is not consistent with Habermas’s vision where the ‘coffee house’ represents a small group discussion. The fragmentation phenomenon is not limited to the mushrooming of niches; indeed, Schement and Curtis added that the media environment shows its fragmentation “when messages filtered through the media environment come unconnected, or as bits without organic integrity.” This phenomenon risks negatively impacting the public sphere as “[fragmentation] influences the climate of ideas within which we form values and construct reality” (1997, 120).

Despite this series of pessimistic views on the role of the Internet, Papacharissi points out that “the Internet may actually enhance the public sphere, but it does so in a way that is not comparable to our past experience of public discourse” (2002, p. 18). It was predicted that the Internet would not become the new public sphere and that it would be better to analyze it as something radically different (*ibid.*).

Moving the discussion to the Chinese case, it is worth noting that besides the rise of the Internet in China, a marked growth in voluntary associations has been one of the most relevant trends registered in the post-Mao era. In 2003, more than 266,000 no-profit and voluntary associations had registered with the state. The phenomenon is even more remarkable if we consider that the total number of registered,

state-sponsored and unregistered organizations exceeded 8 million units.<sup>12</sup> Nara Dillon frames the idea of civil society in China arguing that in Western countries civil society should be considered autonomous and independent from the state. Dillon prefers to conceptualize the idea of Chinese civil society with a more neutral “voluntary sector” as it has to find a compromise between the state and private sector, for-profit companies included (2009). This historical trend should be highlighted and not isolated from the development of the Chinese Internet that will be discussed in the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. These standards are used to support wireless communication and mobile Internet access and became very popular in China between 2011 and 2013.
2. The Gini coefficient quantifies statistical dispersion in a country, measuring the income distribution of a nation's residents. A Gini coefficient of zero shows perfect income equality, while a Gini coefficient of 1 expresses the maxim inequality. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, from 1997 to 2012 the Chinese Gini coefficient ranged from 0.37 to 0.47.
3. The journalist Tao Ran defines mass incidents as “any kind of planned or impromptu gathering that forms because of internal contradictions” (*The Guardian*, 16 December 2011).
4. The Ministry of Public Security counted more than 10,000 incidents in 1994 and more than 74,000 in 2004.
5. Chapter 4 of this project will be devoted to the etymological, historical and social context of the Chinese idea of civil society.
6. The first resolution of the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo Gongchandang de Diyige Jueyi* 中国共产党第一个决议) <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64553/4427949.html>.
7. Hu Yaobang, On party journalism work (*Guanyu Dang de Xinwen Gongzuo* 关于党的新闻工作), *Renminwang* 人民网, 8 February 1985, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-02/07/content\\_2557568.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-02/07/content_2557568.htm).
8. Guo Yafei “Enthusiastically show innovation, increase dynamism and go forward with stable steps: an authoritative official debate on radically reforming the Journalism and Broadcasting industries” (*Jiji Zhudong Shenru Chuangxin, Jiada Lidu Wenbu Tuijin: Yonguan Bumen Fuzeren Tan Jinyibu Shenhua Xinwen Chubao Guanbo Yingshiye Gaige*) 积极主动 深入创新 加大力度 稳步推进: 有关部门负责人谈进一步深化新闻出版广播影视业改革, *Renminwang* 人民网, 15 January 2002, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/19/20020115/648902.html>.

9. The history of telegraphy is an important exception in this sense also because its development began before the establishment and success of the CCP (see Zhou 2006).
10. For a detailed description of this project, see Chap. 3.
11. The “long tail” phenomenon refers to all the cultural products that are not best-sellers but that are still positioned in the market. This is possible because of the limited costs required to memorize the information of the products online, which allows them a longer market life. The growth of small sites greatly increased the Internet’s content as well as the creation of niches, leading to the possibility of creating specific applications.
12. China Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook 2007 (*Zhongguo Mingzheng Tongji Nianjian* 中国民政统计年鉴 2007 年).

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