

## PREFACE

Since July 2008, China has been the most populated country also in terms of Internet users (CNNIC 2008). Nevertheless, considering only the quantitative (and unprecedented) growth of Internet users in China in the last years fails to appreciate the specific importance of studying the Chinese Internet. Its development should take into account a more comprehensive social and economic context.

The main goal of this research is to identify the most important political, socio-economic and technical determinants of Internet development in China through a historical approach that combines political economic, cultural and public studies.

A political economic approach addresses the most relevant “constitutive choices” (Starr 2004) that characterized the establishment of the Internet infrastructure in China.

Cultural studies provide a second layer of analysis to avoid a deterministic approach and highlight the ongoing relationships between the Internet as a new media and the strengthening of a nascent Chinese civil society (Wang 1991). The specific Chinese cultural perspective aims at limiting the comparison with Western policies and histories about the Internet’s development. All China Internet Information Network Center (CNNIC) statistical reports on Internet development published from 1997 to January 2017 were collected and analyzed to describe the most relevant historical and cultural trends.

Public studies represent a third layer of investigation within a historical analysis framework, allowing dividing the history of the Internet in

China into three periods linked to the last three government administrations (Jiang Zemin; Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao; Xi Jinping). To provide a clear description, an explanatory case study outlines each period following fractal theory (Mandelbrot 2004).

The first case study analyzes the implementation of the Gold Shield Project (*jindun gongcheng*) and aims to describe the needs of the Chinese government to not only implement a vertical control over online content, but also to support the growth of a domestic Internet industry, limiting the presence of Western services. The second case study focuses on the shift to the commercialization and online services implementation of the Internet, describing the failed launch of the Green Dam Youth Escort (*lvbahuaji huhang*), and confirms the importance of the synchronic development of Web 2.0 platforms and the co-evolution theory of the Chinese digital civil society (Yang 2009). The third case study covers two policies implemented by Xi's government, the anti-rumors campaign (*daji yaoyan*) and the real-name registration system (*shimingzhi*), both used to provide the most recent Internet political framework in China.

A separate part of the study presents the findings of data collected during two months of fieldwork in China during the summer of 2013, with 28 in-depth interviews of people in Chinese Internet think tanks, scholars, journalists and editorialists of national magazines and newspapers, and Internet managers and specialists in Beijing. The research questions were:

- “How can Chinese civil society be defined (if it can be defined) through the study of the Internet in China?”
- “To what extent have the Internet and Web 2.0 platforms impacted the development of civil society?”
- “What are the relationships among the government, users and Internet companies?”

The outcomes of the present research promote a better understanding of the constitutive choices related to the Internet in China as well as their development, unique characteristics and contradictions.

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