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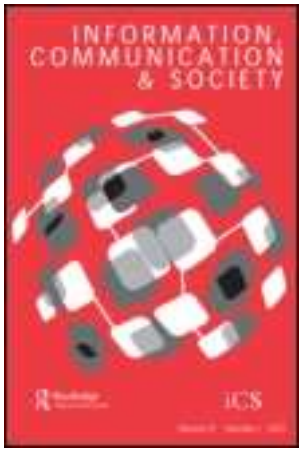

Information, Communication & Society
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rics20

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Published online: 18 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Wenhong Chen (2014) Taking stock, moving forward: the Internet, social networks and civic engagement in Chinese societies, Information, Communication & Society, 17:1, 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2013.857425

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.857425

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Information, Communication & Society, 2014
Vol. 17, No. 1, 1–6, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.857425

Routledge
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Taking stock, moving forward: the Internet, social networks and civic engagement in Chinese societies

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(*Received 16 October 2013; accepted 16 October 2013*)

The Internet in China reflects many contradictions and complexities of the society in which it is embedded. Despite the growing significance of digital media and technologies, research on their contingent, nonlinear, and sometimes paradoxical impact on Chinese citizens' civic engagement remains theoretically underdeveloped and empirically understudied. As importantly, many studies on the Internet implications in the Chinese societies have centered on China. This essay introduces seven articles that draw on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to advance a balanced and context-rich understanding of the implications of digital media and technologies in China, Taiwan, and the global Chinese diaspora. It further discusses venues for future research, especially studies that take into account the evolving Chinese media landscape and the rise of the mobile Internet, civic and political participation across multiple platforms and their interactions, as well as organizational and interpersonal networks as the state and an emerging civil society inform, empower, and engage one another via digital media.

Keywords: the Internet; digital media; social media; Weibo; ICTs; civic engagement; China; Taiwan; Chinese diaspora; transnational practices

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Taking stock

Almost 600 million of Chinese are connected via a variety of digital media and communication technologies, facilitating self-representation, creative expression, and social and cultural participation. The prevalent political control and aggressive commercialization notwithstanding, a vast, ephemeral, online communicative space has been formed where users comment and discuss public and private affairs, greatly enhancing the individualization of civic engagement while making censorship difficult.

Digital media and technologies increase transparency and enhance the visibility of oppressed groups, in particular in comparison with print and broadcast media under tighter government control (Norris, 2001). A growing number of so-called online mass incidents has been facilitated by social media, especially Sina Weibo – a Chinese micro-blogging service started in 2009. The literature has offered rich account of the esthetics, genres, and strategies of online activism in China (Yang, 2009).

While early studies may have drawn on a simplistic dystopian or utopian framework and pundits have primarily celebrated technological affordance in the forms of Facebook or Twitter revolution, other scholars doubt whether technology *per se* would achieve any genuine political

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or social changes. Morozov (2011) uses China as a prime counter-example of 'the Dictator's Dilemma'. The lack of Chinese response to the Arab Spring seems to reinforce the notation that China has been successful in harnessing the power of the Internet without significant political changes. On the one hand, the hope that the Internet will automatically bring democracy to authoritarian regimes is slim. On the other hand, despite the prevalent political control, rapid commercialization, and digital divides, digital media provided millions of Chinese opportunities for civic participation (Hassid, 2012).

In this sense, China offers an interesting case to understand the potentials and limitations of digital media and technologies. After all, the extent to which technologies live up to their potential is contingent on the social and institutional contexts as well as how people use them and what they use them for. Despite the growing significance of digital media, research on their contingent, nonlinear, and sometimes paradoxical impact on Chinese citizens' civic engagement remains theoretically underdeveloped and empirically understudied. Given its growing significance in the global economy and an inherent tension between the Internet and an authoritarian regime, many studies on the Internet implications in the Chinese societies have focused on China. Addressing these knowledge gaps, this special issue presents seven articles that draw on diverse theoretical and methodological approaches to understand the implications of digital media and technologies in China, Taiwan, and the global Chinese diaspora.

Combining interview and social media data on Tzu Chi Foundation, a large Taiwan-based transnational Buddhist organization active in and beyond the Chinese diaspora, Cheong, Huang, and Brummans demonstrate that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a critical role in the communicative coproduction and reinforcement of the organization's meaning, value, and mission. Internal and external stakeholders such as organizational leaders, members, and non-members appropriate digital media for both strategic and mundane autocommunicative practices such as archiving and broadcasting the organization's aspiration and accomplishment embedded in its founder's teaching or posting messages and interacting on social media. Cheong, Huang, and Brummans conclude that the ongoing mediated communicative action has become profoundly co-constitutive, giving the organization symbolic meaning and logic to develop a coherent 'virtual self' that helps it stand out in the global spiritual marketplace and contributing to the formation of transnational spiritual ties for global humanitarian work.

The concept of media multiplexity has often been used in research on interpersonal networks or media use (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998). Drawing on data from the Taiwan Social Change Survey, Hsieh and Li evaluate the extent to which online media multiplexity – regularly using multiple types of online media for social interaction – as well as civic talk online with friends in the interpersonal space are related with online expressive political participation such as contacting politicians or expressing political opinions online. Hsieh and Li's findings resonate with existing empirical studies on a positive relationship between Internet use and civic participation in democratic societies (Xenos & Moy, 2007). More importantly, their work expands the existing literature focusing on the relationship between media multiplexity and interpersonal networks to its civic implications by highlighting media multiplexity as a critical link between interpersonal communication in the private space and political participation in the public sphere.

Advancing an emerging literature on Sina Weibo and other Chinese micro-blogging services, three articles in this special issue draw on data collected on Weibo to examine its civic and political implications. Based on a content analysis of more than 4600 Weibo posts, Bondes and Schucher investigate the discourse, composition, and transformation of Sina Weibo discussion on the high-speed train crash near Wenzhou in July 2011. Analyzing 278,980 Weibo posts collected via computational methods on two mass online incidents in 2011, the Wukan case and the Haimen case, respectively, Tong and Zuo assess the effect of Weibo communication on state legitimacy. Huang and Sun examine an issue-based network on Weibo, namely the network between and

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among the 1840 followers of an activist who uses the Weibo handle – Homeowner Association Communication.

On the one hand, Weibo rapidly expands the alternative public sphere, promotes expression of personal emotion, concerns, and opinion on public affairs, and pushes the government for transparency and accountability. Bondes and Schucher report that the intensive Weibo discussion on the derailed high-speed train triggered broader debates on national issues such as product safety, official corruption, and government transparency. In a similar vein, Tong and Zuo reveal that Weibo discussion on the Wukan case – where villagers protested local corruption, land seizure, and police power abuse – facilitated a rapid diffusion of information and opinions on a politically sensitive event, bypassing the agenda setting and censorship in the mainstream media.

However, both studies caution against celebrating digital media for enabling a self-organized networked form of contentious politics, simply by aggregating and scaling up millions of micro actions from ordinary citizens without conventional organization or a coherent collective identity. In tandem with the existing studies, Bondes and Schucher carefully point out that the lack of organization hindered the transformation of reactive defense such as calling for consumer boycotts to normative political agenda. Without organization, Weibo discussion fades as quickly as it emerges. Interestingly, Bondes and Schucher note that it was Sina Weibo staff who played a role of organizing agent by setting up a page devoted to the train crash.

Adding more cold water, Tong and Zuo's unique two-case comparison reveals that the contour, trajectory and eventual impact of online mass incidents are highly contingent on issue and context. The extent to which local protestors were able to attract attention from national elites and media is crucial for the length and the intensity of Weibo discussion, the composition of the participants, as well as the type of claims and demands made. The Wukan case trigged by land seizure quickly gained national attention and thus became more sustainable, led by local and national elites and eventually generated discussions on the political system and development policy. In comparison, the not-in-my-backyard type Haimen case on keeping a polluter out of the city was more transient, led by local elites, and focused on specific local demands.

Rather than the event-based approach adopted by Bondes and Schucher as well as by Tong and Zuo, Huang and Sun use an issue-based approach and analyze the structure of an issue network among homeowner associations and activists. They identify widespread cross-province follower relations in this issue network on Weibo, in stark contrast to the extremely local nature of homeowner associations offline. That is, Weibo facilitates glocalized networks with local embeddedness and global outreach (Chen & Wellman, 2009), allowing homeowner associations and activists to extend their geographic outreach while remaining embedded in local contexts. They further reveal that retweet is related to the number of followers within rather than outside of the issue network. On the one hand, it shows that issue relevance remains important to information diffusion and potential consensus building. On the other hand, it indicates a lack of networks of civic organizations and activists that span both geographic and issue boundaries. The issue network developed and maintained by one individual activist is large, geographically diverse, and active in information diffusion but has a long way to go if compared with Tzu Chi Foundation's mastery of ICTs for organizational communication. Nonetheless, Huang and Sun convincingly demonstrate that digital media allows local actors to form glocalized networks, which may contribute to long-term collective action and activism through organization building and mobilization.

Civic engagement can come from unexpected places and actors. Wu directs attention to the fascinating yet often downplayed relation between entertainment media and civic engagement. She provides a valuable insight on how online discourse centered on entertainment can contribute to an alternative, participatory form of civic engagement. Drawing on content analysis of discussion threads, Wu examines how seemingly apolitical yet public discourse in an online fan community based on *The Super Girl*, one of the most popular reality TV shows developed by Hunan

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TV in China, offered opportunities for fans to not only discuss the esthetics of the show but also express concerns and opinions on broader social issues, develop civic values, and practice civic engagement. Most interestingly, when comparing fans' online discussion and the discourse in mainstream newspaper about the show, Wu detects a new journalistic space as professional reporters carved out new freedom – limited and precarious – in their coverage by tacitly citing controversial information or opinion from anonymous 'net pals' that may challenge the authority while protecting themselves from being held directly accountable.

However, both traditional media and the Internet in China were designed to enhance the Party rule and have been under state control. The state has built the 'Great Firewall' – a massive maze of laws, regulations, and administrative practices to monitor and censor Internet service providers and individual users. Many studies have examined the extent to which the government filters or blocks foreign news sites, social media sites, and sites carrying politically sensitive topics. Joss Wright significantly advances this literature through a layered analysis of the policy and technological architecture of the Chinese national-level filtering system and its regional variations by targets, applications, and effects. Conducting innovative experiments that represent a nation-wide remote survey of the filtering experienced by Chinese Internet users, Wright makes visible a 'centrally coordinated, local implemented' censorship mechanism, in which censors prefer misdirection rather than blocking, trying to make users perceive outright censorship as network error.

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Moving forward

The Internet in China reflects the many contradictions and complexities of the society in which it is embedded: rapid economic growth accompanied by glaring social inequalities, relative economic freedom parallel to strict political control. The seven articles have made significant contribution to a balanced and context-rich understanding of the implications of digital media and technologies in Chinese societies. They open up promising venues for future research on the contingent and sometimes paradoxical impacts of digital and social media in Chinese societies.

Since China began its ongoing transformation from a command to a market economy in 1978, the state has built its legitimacy on economic growth and political stability. Although upward mobility has become less attainable than it was in the early years of the reform, many citizens, especially members of the new middle class, have benefited from the recent prosperity. Few people see a regime change would be a viable or desirable solution. However, the distribution of the prosperity gained through more than three decades of economic reform has become increasingly uneven. While most protest cases have been driven by narrowly defined socioeconomic or environmental injustice rather than normative political claims and protest participants seek for solutions within the current Chinese political system (Lu, Li, & Chen, 2012), many participants in more recent protests are not necessarily direct victims of injustice or deprivation.

The state has tried to curtail the rising tide of collective action through surveillance, prevention, and intervention. Although collective action challenging the legitimacy of the political power would be harshly suppressed, environmental, livelihood, and civil rights issues have become increasingly tolerated (Hassid, 2012; Yang, 2009). The Chinese government has invested enormous computational and human resources for censorship as well as for influencing public opinion. On the one hand, government censorship has grown more pervasive and aggressive. For instance, starting from late 2012, Weibo service providers have been required to verify the identities of users. While identity verification signals trustworthiness and increases the likelihood of being followed and retweeted, it makes surveillance more convenient. One study of more than two million Weibo posts showed that 4.5% were deleted by the system and about 30% of deletion occurred within 5–30 minutes (Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). On the other hand, aiming to understand and 'guide' public opinions online, the government hires more than

two million people to analyze online public opinions (BBC, 2013) and had opened 176,700 Weibo accounts as of 2012 (Li, 2013).

Technologies are used for surveillance and crackdown as well as mobilization and resistance. A better understanding has to take into account forces at multiple levels including the state, civic organizations and issue networks, and interpersonal ties that affect networked actions by structuring the flow of information and resources. More attention needs to be paid to the evolving Chinese media landscape, the multiple forms and venues of civic and political participation, and individuals' network position in the larger social structure.

A booming economy and an emerging middle class with an unfettered appetite for information and entertainment have enabled the rapid growth and commercialization of the Chinese media industries both online and offline. With growing repertoires of channels, platforms, media multiplexity as well as multidirectional interaction between online and offline media, more studies are needed to examine the implications of digital, social, and mobile media in a Chinese media landscape operating under the double logic of political propaganda and corporate profitmaking. Future research needs to take into account individuals' media use via multiple platforms: digital, traditional, and mobile. Given that 70% of Chinese Internet users use mobile Internet, it is important to study how the personal, pervasive, portable, and perpetual communication accommodated by mobile devices allows users to easily switch between the most private and the most public spaces and helps to give members of disadvantaged social groups a more accessible tool for civic engagement.

As importantly, most studies have examined digital activism rather than civic engagement both online and offline. In particular, it is crucial to investigate the differential manifestation of civic and political participation online and offline and their dynamic interactions with one another, as a joint product of technological empowerment and institutional constraints. A thorny question is slacktivism (Morozov, 2011). Future research needs to explore the underlying institutional, social, and psychological mechanisms that link multi-platform civic engagement and when the Internet serves as a 'safety valve' that allows people to vent anger and reduce their drive for real changes and when it works as a 'pressure cooker' that trigger and intensify action on the ground (Hassid, 2012).

More studies need to look at the glaring gaps and subtle variations in the access, use, and especially the unintended consequences of digital media. Although the digital divides – gaps in Internet access and use – have narrowed in many aspects, more than half of Chinese citizens still do not use the Internet. On top of an online population dominated by better educated and more affluent urbanites, about 5% of Weibo users generated more than 80% of the original posts (Fu & Chau, 2013).

Big data have generated great expectation as well as many concerns on reliability and validity. Big data are not necessarily representative or inclusive, which indeed often have limited information on users' sociodemographic or psychological attributes. Yet such attributes can have great impacts on the circulation and content of Weibo post. As importantly, how individuals interpret their digital appropriations may not be easily accessible via big data. Thus, mixed methods that combine online data with surveys or interviews as well as comparative analysis across multiple cases, media platforms, or societies may help to present a more comprehensive picture with greater depth and granularity.

Combined, the seven articles in this special issue refresh and enrich the existing literature on the transformative power and limitations of the Internet and other media and communication technologies. The research on the Internet in Chinese societies will benefit from and contribute to fundamental debates on social networks, social movement, and social changes that have been central in political science, sociology, and communication and media studies. As Castells (2009) argues, the power relationships embedded in the existing communication networks among media, politics, and businesses are 'programmed' to favor the status quo rather than social change. How the Chinese

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Internet paradox evolves will depend on the negotiation between the state and an emerging civil society inform, empower, and engage one another through media and especially digital media.

Acknowledgements

The author deeply appreciates the insight and wisdom shared by Barry Wellman, Stephen Reese, Joseph Straubhaar, and Heidi Campbell in the process of editing this special issue. Without the hard work from the authors and the reviewers, this special issue would not be possible. Special thanks go to Brian Loader and Sarah Shrive-Morrison for their guidance and assistance.

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