Political Communication in China

Convergence or Divergence Between the
Media and Political System?

Edited by
Wenfang Tang and Shanto Iyengar

ROUTLEDGE

Political Communication in China

It is widely recognized that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses the media to set the agenda for political discourse, propagate official policies, monitor public opinion, and rally regime support. State agencies in China control the full spectrum of media programming, either through ownership or the power to regulate.

Political Communication in China examines the two factors which have contributed to the rapid development of media infrastructure in China: technology and commercialization. Economic development led to technological advancement, which in turn brought about the rapid modernization of all forms of communication, from 'old' media such as television to the Internet, cell phones, and satellite communications. This volume examines how these recent developments have affected the relationship between the CCP and the mass media as well as the implications of this evolving relationship for understanding Chinese citizens' media use, political attitudes, and behavior.

The chapters in this book represent a diverse range of research methods, from surveys, content analysis, and field interviews to the manipulation of aggregate statistical data. The result is a lively debate which creates many opportunities for future research into the fundamental question of convergence between political and media regimes.

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Introduction

The Emerging Media System in China: Implications for Regime Change

WENFANG TANG and SHANTO IYENGAR

It is well established that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses the media to set the agenda for political discourse, propagate official policies, monitor public opinion, and rally regime support (Brady 2009; Hague & Harrop, 2010, p. 156). Effective use of the media as a political tool is always a top CCP priority. The regime's media strategies are formulated at the highest level in the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee. The strategies are implemented by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee, which oversees operations of the state media organizations. Other relevant official agencies include the State Press and Publication Administration (for print media control); the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (broadcast media control); and the Ministry of Information Industry (responsible for digital media control). Finally, the New China News Agency (Xinhua) is entrusted with the task of gathering and distributing information. Thus, state agencies control the full spectrum of media programming, either through ownership or the power to regulate.

On the surface at least, the extent of official control over media organizations suggests that China remains a prototypical case of an authoritarian media system (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). In fact, however, dramatic increases in the size and diversity of the Chinese media market[1] have created openings for private owners and a gradual loosening of party control.

Two factors contributed to the rapid development of media infrastructure in China: technology and commercialization. Economic development led to technological advancement, which in turn brought about the rapid modernization of all forms of communication, from "old" media such as television to the Internet, cell phones, and satellite communications. Today, private and quasiprivate media organizations operate in a competitive environment where programming decisions reflect not only the political goals of the CCP, but also the economic logic of increased audience size and advertising revenue.

The six articles making up this special issue of *Political Communication* examine how these recent developments have affected the relationship between the CCP and the mass

media as well as the implications of this evolving relationship for understanding Chinese citizens' media use, political attitudes, and behavior. Three of the six articles emphasize the role of media commercialization.

Daniela Stockmann examines the impact of commercialization on newspaper coverage of the United States. She analyzes a database of news reports published by the *People's Daily* (a noncommercial newspaper) and *Beijing Evening News* (a commercial paper). Her analysis compares coverage in 1999, a year of high tension between China and the United States following the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, with coverage in 2003, a year of relatively tranquil Sino-U.S. relations. Using computer-aided text analysis, Stockmann shows that the *People's Daily* was less negative toward the United States than the *Beijing Evening News* in 1999 because the CCP did not want to worsen its relationship with the United States. But in 2003, the *People's Daily* became just as negative as the *Beijing Evening News*, particularly on topics not sanctioned by the CCP. The reason for this shared negativity was that both newspapers were under pressures to generate profit and attempted to "cash in" on the heightened public interest in the potential conflict between the two nations by featuring more negative, conflict-laden news. Stockmann's findings suggest that weakening state control over the media will not necessarily result in "objective" news as some might have hoped.[2] Instead, commercialization encourages media producers to pander to nationalist and ethnocentric sentiments that, in turn, may compel the government to adopt more aggressive foreign policies (Shirk, 2011b).

Junhao Hong's article is a case study of the New China News Agency (Xinhua), the CCP's principal agent for news gathering and distribution. Hong documents the transformation of Xinhua from a pure propaganda tool of the CCP to a world-class news organization, as reflected in the size and training of its journalistic staff, the timeliness of its news content, and the quantity of its news output. While the author warns the reader to expect continued control by the CCP, he identifies various indicators of increasing commercialization of the news organization, including the creation of its business department, the marketing of its news and information products on a worldwide basis, and the creation of the China Xinhua News Network Corporation, the first global news agency with its own television broadcast services.

Future research will need to address the impact of the increasingly market-based and professionalized Xinhua on its news content, credibility, and responsiveness to the CCP. While Hong's article provides some interesting comparisons between the world's leading news agencies, further research into the relationships between official news agencies and their parent governments is required to shed light on the diffusion of "going public" (Kernell, 1996) or "mediatization" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) as a strategy of governance.

Rawnsley and Gong add another twist to the impact of commercialization in their article on the relationship between politicians and journalists in Taiwan. Because Taiwan shares a common cultural tradition but differs from China in its democratic political environment and greater degree of media commercialization, what happens in Taiwan today may provide some clues to what may happen in China tomorrow.

Rawnsley and Gong carried out semistructured interviews with journalists and politicians representing Taiwan's major news organizations and political parties. The interviews were conducted during the 2008 Taiwanese presidential election. Their findings suggest, in keeping with findings from American research, that the two groups have become locked in a "hyperadversarial" relationship characterized by mutual suspicion and distrust. The authors conclude that commercialization has adversely impacted the quality of news coverage by encouraging sensationalism, partisan bias, and negativity and that democracy in its early stages does not guarantee media objectivity and professionalism.

Rawnsley and Gong's findings may make some readers pessimistic about the trajectory of the democratization process in Taiwan. Others may treat their study as a warning to China against taking a similar path to democratization. Yet Taiwanese media operate in a much wider ideological spectrum than Chinese media, and they provide much more room for political debate. Each media outlet may be highly biased, but the diversity of views offered by these outlets arguably makes Taiwanese media more pluralistic than many mature democracies. Further, Taiwanese journalists may not take democratic norms seriously, but they do make politicians more accountable. In a comparative context, Taiwanese news coverage may be lacking in objectivity, but Taiwanese society offers considerable press freedom that is taken advantage of by Taiwanese journalists to provide checks and balances against public officials. In this sense, Taiwan is further down the path of democratization than China.

The remaining three articles in this issue deal with the effect of technological changes on public opinion and mass political behavior. Ya-Wen Lei frames her study around the debate about whether the Internet will lead to democratization or consolidation of the authoritarian regime in China. Using the Chinese component (conducted in 2007) of the 5th Wave World Values Survey, the author shows that Chinese Internet users were more likely to show support for democratic norms, a sense of political discontent, and willingness to engage in collective political action.

Media effects scholars will especially appreciate Ya-Wen Lei's efforts to disentangle the "effects" of Internet use on activism from a selection model in which political activists are more apt to use the Internet than nonactivists. The author shows that while Internet use significantly predicts political activism, the reciprocal impact of political activism on Internet use is much weaker.

While Lei's results suggest an optimistic view of technological development on democratization, Mou, Atkin, and Fu are less sanguine. Their findings—based on surveys of Chinese college students—do not support the utopian view of Internet democracy. Rather, they show that online political discussion is limited by the "strong presence of government regulation." They further show that political apathy and distrust toward the political system are significant demobilizing factors that discourage participation in online political discussion.

The last of the articles focusing on technology—by Shi, Lu, and Aldrich—uses survey data to examine the relationship between individuals' exposure to either government-controlled or independent news sources on Chinese citizens' perceptions of the United States. As of 2005, media control in China had loosened to a limited extent, and about 14% of their survey respondents reported access to noncontrolled foreign media, mostly through satellite TV and the Internet. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the authors find that access to noncontrolled media sources did not make any difference to public perceptions of the United States. They conclude that other influences on public opinion take precedence over the degree of official control over media sources.

The Shi, Lu, and Aldrich article raises a set of important questions concerning the responsiveness of public opinion to official propaganda. The authors report that nationalism increases anti-Americanism; we might expect propaganda to increase the sense of nationalism. It is possible, therefore, that the influence of propaganda on public opinion is indirect and mediated by core values including the sense of national identity.

The inconsistent findings of the three articles on technology and public opinion illuminate a larger debate about the role of technology in democratization. The optimists see information technology as an inherently democratizing force that will eventually bring down the authoritarian regime in China (Xiao, 2011). Others, however, are much less hopeful; they argue that access to technology is limited to the privileged strata (Margolis, 2007),

that increased social networking does not necessarily result in mobilization for political action (Gladwell, 2010), and, most importantly, that authoritarian regimes are in a better position (vis-à-vis their opponents) to exploit technology for political gain (Morozov, 2011; Shirky, 2011). Technological counterparts to old-fashioned, Cultural Revolution-like mob actions include online political intimidation through violations of individual privacy, such as the human-flesh search engine (Downey, 2010; Shirk, 2011a).

The ongoing debate over technology thus turns on the question of whether access to technology will promote regime-supporting activism, regime-challenging activism, or both. Since the Internet is still tightly controlled by the Chinese state and its intended goal is to promote regime support as well as mobilized participation, it remains to be seen whether further diffusion of the technology will achieve the regime's intended goal of strengthening regime legitimacy or the unintended consequence of provoking autonomous, spontaneous activism. The Chinese state is too often thought of as a passive fire extinguisher facing an increasing number of blazes to put out. It is simply too easy to forget that the CCP is also constantly and actively "fanning the flames" by using the media to propagate, mobilize, and consolidate its own power.

We are pleased to note that the articles in this issue represent a diverse range of research methods, from surveys (Lei; Mou, Atkin, and Fu; Shi, Lu, and Aldrich), content analysis (Stockmann), and field interviews (Rawnsley and Gong; Stockmann; Hong) to the manipulation of aggregate statistical data (Hong). We anticipate one future addition to the methodological tool kit, namely experimentation. Experimental designs will prove especially useful in establishing the directionality of causation between media exposure and use on the one hand and political attitudes on the other (see Lei).

In closing, we hope that this special issue will serve to encourage further research into the fundamental question of convergence between political and media regimes. The Chinese case is especially interesting because a media system has evolved that is not purely authoritarian while operating under an authoritarian political regime. The "equilibrium" outcome in most societies is convergence; authoritarian regimes maintain authoritarian control over all forms of media (but especially broadcasting), while democratic regimes have increasingly gravitated to a deregulated, market-based media model (see McCargo, 2003; Sakr, 2007; Koltsova, 2006). Our reading of history suggests that something must give in China, either regime liberalization or a hardening of control over the media.

Notes

1. In the case of broadcasting, China has the largest number of TV households. For 2007 data, see http://www.reportlinker.com/p096726/China-Cable-Television-Market-Assessment-and-Forecast-to.html. In addition to having the largest book market by volume in the world, China also has more Internet users than any other nation (for 2010 data, see http://publishingperspectives.com/2010/09/china-as-market-focus-at-the-london-book-fair-in-2012/ and http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm).

2. For example, market advocates see a positive role of commercialization in reducing official control over news sources. Market competition for audiences drives media organizations to report news beyond the officially permitted scope (He, 2008), thereby increasing the credibility, objectivity, professionalism, and autonomy of the news organizations.

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