Book Review

Media and Dissent in China: A Review

Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*, Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010, 325 pp.

reviewed by

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Today's world is totally transformed by global electronic networks. None of the authoritarian states is capable of imposing absolute control without challenge and compromise. This is best seen in the "Jasmine Revolutions" that have spread eastward from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, then doubled back to Libya. Initiated by countless courageous citizens through electronic media, these revolutionary upheavals mark the beginning of a new era in the early twenty-first century. Young people around the Arab world have stood up themselves and organized spontaneous popular uprisings against the decade-long authoritarian regimes that obstructed their upward mobility and deprived them of civil, political, and subsistence rights. After the quick victory of the Tunisian revolution, the Egyptians succeeded in using social media to break down the state's surveillance machine and topple President Hosni Mubarak, who ruled the country from 1981 to 2011. The new media interacted with the oral and printed forms of news transmission and created an extensive chain of political news diffusion through which the Egyptians interpreted the evolving turbulent events and organized massive protests based on the information they believed to be reliable. History shows that the authoritarian regimes rule by fear also rule in fear. Even though the Mubarak regime arrested Wael Ghonim, the charismatic Google executive, for creating a Facebook group to start the demonstrations and demonized the protesters as instigated by hostile foreign forces, such oppressive measures only reflected the growing paranoia of the government. Once the Egyptians acquired their own source of information outside the official media, this became a bad omen for the regime. When the state completely lost control of the escalating situation, the public were ready to step in and take over in the name of liberty.

This outburst of democratic uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East calls for the need to re-conceptualize the complicated relations between media technologies and popular activism. As Henry Giroux points out, "politics is the performative register of moral action"; it prevents justice and compassion from

being extinguished among us.[1] Since rhetorical performance and online politics are constitutive of one another in state-society interactions, it is important to explore the electronic and theatrical modes of political mobilization in the early twenty-first century. Against this backdrop, the recent Internet development in China shows that Beijing has great difficulty striking a balance between control and flexibility over online activities. This irreconcilable contradiction is deeply embedded in the Chinese government's media policies, which promote a more open market economy while tightening formal and informal censorships over news media and freedom of speech online.[2] How can Chinese activists make claims and rally popular support through the use of social media? What kinds of electronic mechanisms are available for Chinese political actors to engage the emotions of the targeted audiences and mobilize them for dramatic actions? How does the politics of electronic activism equalize the state-society relations and transform the one-party state? Johan Lagerkvist addressed these questions by exploring the increased role of social media technologies in Chinese society, the one-party state's policies of Internet regulation and control, the new cultural norms in social media, and the competition between citizen journalism and online government propaganda. Lagerkvist critically analyzes the Chinese government's Internet policies and draws on field study observations to throw light on the diverse patterns of online mobilization, the emergence of netizens, and the new mechanisms that have transformed the state-society interactions online and offline.

Throughout the analysis, Lagerkvist emphasizes the empowerment of tech-savvy Chinese youths and the release of "a revolutionary impulse" towards China's transition to democracy. While challenging the binary opposition between Internet freedom and Internet control, he has gone beyond the conventional focus on the state's manipulation of Internet users to highlight the paradoxical feature of China's Internet landscape: the growing online freedom parallels the intensification of government Internet control through formal and informal censorships (p. 17). One unintended consequence of this development is "the normative change among individual employees and officials of the bureaucratic state" (p. 285). Rapid changes in sociocultural norms have the potential to promote online and offline activism among different social sectors and interested groups. These changing norms are beyond the ability of the one party-state to control and co-opt, and this will validate the attitudinal and behavioural openness in society. When a critical body of citizenry and large numbers of reform-minded intellectuals and government bureaucrats refuse to accept the existing authoritarian system and organize collective actions publicly, this will mark the beginning of China's democratization.

The book has eight chapters. The introductory chapter re-conceptualizes China's Internet development as an ongoing battle between media consumers and freedom-seeking netizens in an emerging civil society, and a competition

between ordinary Internet users and public security officials (p. 14). These tensions and conflicts have characterized China's Internet landscape. Chapter one discusses the limits to the state's Internet regulations. As the old Chinese saying goes, "Whenever there is a policy from above, there is always a counter-strategy from below." The Chinese netizens are not passive bystanders who obey the state's Internet regulations. Instead, they devise many strategies to bypass the state-installed Green Dam filtering software and to access more controversial information online. Equally important to the politics of Internet communication is the frenetic change in online culture. Chapter two points out that the rapid expansion of blog-sphere coincides with the rise of individualism in contemporary China. People from all walks of life employ blogging to network with strangers and to challenge the longstanding social and cultural norms. Some activists, intellectuals and news commentators even use blogging to express their opinions and grievances and to organize grassroots activities. Some citizen journalists have emerged in this Internet age to challenge the state-controlled media, a topic of discussion in chapter three. But these investigative journalists are aware of the risk of making direct political criticisms. They tend to focus on social and economic issues and exercise certain level of self-censorship in order to avoid attracting unnecessary attention from the state.

Chapter four draws attention to the new political rhetoric of building a "harmonious society" (*héxié shèhuì* 和諧社會). Despite the state's efforts to promote a new vision of overall societal balance and harmony, the netizens are suspicious about the ethical disconnect between this rhetoric and the reality of authoritarian power, and they purposefully mispronounce the word "harmony" as "river crab" (*héxiè* 河蟹) in Mandarin Chinese. Even though the state seeks to tighten its control over the Internet contents, the commercialization of social media has created new online space for the netizens to bypass government censorship. The erosion of the old ideological propaganda and the emergence of an Internet counterculture are addressed in chapters five and six, respectively. In this brave new world, the government's only response is to pursue a policy of "ideo-tainment", that is to combine entertainment materials with subtle ideological and nationalistic messages. This type of soft propaganda is designed to manipulate the public and to de-politicize the online space. In particular, the state has manipulated the online audiences on issues of national security. Since the 1990s, popular nationalism has emerged independently of the state. The government authorities have frequently monitored the online discussion of controversial subjects like the Sino-Japanese and Sino-American rivalries, and have tried to co-opt the rising patriotic sentiments in support of the regime.

The contentions between market forces and political concerns are best seen in the latest dispute over Google in China.[3] In chapter seven, Lagerkvist

highlights the irreconcilable differences between the state's obsession with political control and the Google executives' concerns for privacy and autonomy. Whether Google and other Internet companies can continue to operate in China are completely at the discretion of the authorities. The concluding chapter ends with an optimistic note by identifying new behavioural norms among netizens, especially those low-level government bureaucrats who have critiqued the hierarchical, top-down, authoritarian system and appreciated the new era of civility and genuine discussion online.

The findings and insights of Lagerkvist's study are up-to-date and convincing. Lagerkvist has succeeded in mapping the latest trends of China's Internet development. In particular, he shows that a new generation of Chinese netizens has employed innovative strategies to challenge the state's Internet censorship and mobilize people online for social and political changes. Lagerkvist's argument about Internet empowerment would have been strengthened if he had addressed the gender, ethnic and religious dimensions of China's online activism. Many feminist groups, ethnic minorities (e.g. Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims and Manchurians) and religious movements (e.g. pro-Vatican Catholics, Protestant house churches and Falungong practitioners) have relied on the Internet to propagate their ideas, strengthen their national and transnational networks, and organize their struggles online and offline.[4] In addition, a growing number of young cyber-warriors have crusaded against the so-called Great Firewall of state web censorship and coordinated with prominent dissidents abroad to call for democratic reform of the one-party system.[5] On February 20, 2011, political dissidents and human rights fighters organized simultaneous protests in thirteen cities across China modeled on those in North Africa and the Middle East.[6] On February 27, the protests spread to over twenty cities.[7] The recent arrest of Ai Weiwei, a prominent artist known for his criticism of the Chinese authoritarian state, and the official crackdown on journalists, community activists, workers and churches reveal the proliferation of dissident movements throughout the society.[8] These dissidents have publicly denounced the government's Internet control and pursued what Robert P. Weller calls a new and "alternate civility", which will foster dramatic political change and defend the civil society against complete incorporation by a powerful state.[9] Unless Chinese officials recognize and come to grips with these endogenous forces of change, they will never be able to keep the dissidents in check.

In short, Johan Lagerkvist should be congratulated on producing this comprehensive and useful analysis of China's Internet landscape. This timely book addresses the wide range of critical issues pertaining to the democratic implications of Internet development in China, and deserves to be widely read by anyone concerned about changes in Chinese politics, society, and culture today.

Notes

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1.   Henry Giroux, "Vocationalizing Higher Education: Schooling and the Politics of Corporate Culture", *College Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 147-161.

2.   Jinqiu Zhao, "A Snapshot of Internet Regulation in Contemporary China: Censorship, Profitability and Responsibility", in Friederike Assandri and Dora Martins (eds), *From Early Tang Court Debates to China's Peaceful Rise* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 141-151.

3.   Ken Aulletta, *Googled: The End of the World as We Know It* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Ying Zhu and Bruce Robinson, "Critical Masses, Commerce, and Shifting State-Society Relations in China", *The China Beat* (17th February 2010), retrieved on 30th April 2011 from *<http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1526>*.

4.   Siu-Keung Cheung, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Lida V. Nedilsky (eds), *Marginalization in China: Recasting Minority Politics* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009).

5.   J. David Goodman, "Trying to Stir Up a Popular Protest in China, from a Bedroom in Manhattan", *The New York Times* (29th April 2011), p. A10.

6.   Anita Chang, "China Tries to Stamp Out 'Jasmine Revolution'", The Associated Press (20th February 2011), retrieved on 21st February 2011 from *<http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/A/AS_CHINA_JASMINE_REVOLUTION?SITE=MOSPL&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT>*; Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Security Officials Respond to Call for Protests", *The New York Times* (20th February 2011), retrieved on 21st February 2011 from *<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/asia/21china.html>*.

7.   Ian Johnson, "Protests in China Draw Few Demonstrators but Many Police", *The New York Times* (28th February 2011), p. A10.

8.   Sharon LaFraniere and Edward Wong, "Even with Protests Averted, China Turns to Intimidation of Foreign Journalists", *The New York Times* (17th March 2011), pp. A4 and A9; "Repression and the New Ruling Class: China's Crackdown", and "China's New Rulers: Princelings and the Goon State", *The Economist* (16th April 2011), pp. 12 and 43-44; Andrew Jacobs, "Illicit Church, Evicted, Tries to Buck Beijing", *The New York Times* (18th April 2011), pp. A4 and A9; Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Christians Detained after Attempt at Easter Rites", *The New York Times* (25th April 2011), p. A6; David Barboza, "Truck Drivers in Shanghai Plan to Resume Protests", *The New York Times* (25th April 2011), p. A6.

9.   Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).