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Moving Beyond Democratization: A Thought Piece on the China Internet Research Agenda

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On January 12, 2010, Google announced that it would consider exiting the Chinese market if the company could not “operate an unfiltered search engine within the law” (Google, 2010). Citing a recent cyber attack on its system targeting Gmail accounts of human rights activists, Google reiterated its commitment to freedom of information while criticizing Internet censorship in China. The announcement quickly became headline news across Western media outlets. Once again, the attention was drawn to the ostensible tensions between the decentralizing technology and an obstinately authoritarian regime. Some praised Google for making the right move in defying Chinese censorship (e.g., Jacobs & Helft, 2010), while others took the case as being representative of Western democracy's general frustration with information control in China (e.g., *Washington Post* editorials, 2010). Discussions on this topic are highly indicative of the ongoing fixation, in both the mainstream media and the academic circle, on whether the Internet could democratize China. Several analyses have revealed that academic research on the Internet in China, especially that which is conducted by researchers outside China, tends to concentrate on issues of democracy and the Internet's influence on political authorities (Kluver & Yang, 2005; Qiu & Chan, 2004). Given the difficulty faced by any authoritarian regime attempting to exert totalizing control over decentralized digital networks, which could be potentially empowering for the previously disenfranchised, such a focus is hardly surprising.

Nonetheless, it is hugely problematic if the pre-formed lens of democratization becomes so dominant in China Internet studies that it excludes alternate ways of framing new research. Empirically, this could lead to oversimplification of the very diverse activities taking place in Chinese cyberspace, many of which contribute to a more inclusive communication environment without pursuing overt political agendas. Theoretically, the democratization framework entails a rather limited view, both of politics and of the role of the media in political communication, not to mention the way it neglects the specific Chinese context. Within this framework, politics is understood as being directly related to state power, which can be either challenged or reinforced by new communication technologies. The function of the Internet, on the other hand, is perceived as being mainly instrumental — it provides information or a communication space that is not available through other media channels.

In this short essay, I will first discuss some major limitations of examining the Internet's place in China from the democratization perspective. I then introduce the concept of mediation as an alternative conception of China Internet studies. Here, I draw upon Silverstone's elaboration that “mediation is a

fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded" (2005, p. 189). I am not necessarily arguing for one approach to replace the other, but, rather, trying to expand the scope of our scholarly inquiry.

First of all, the question of whether the Internet will democratize China implies an essentially Western-centric view that treats China as the inscrutable and inferior "other" waiting to be converted to "one of us." This is not to deny the universal appeal of democracy as a desirable goal for China to pursue, but to acknowledge the power relationship embedded in setting the agenda for China Internet research. Under the orientalist gaze of Western scholars and policy makers, the Internet is expected to be the newest tool for taming the "beast" in the East. Just like it was earlier with satellite TV, which was lauded by Rupert Murdoch as being able to tumble any authoritarian regime, now the hope is put on the Internet to provide for a "free flow of information." Naturally, when this new tool is confronted with the counter-power of censorship, the questions of which side prevails then top the agenda. As Tsui (2007) points out, some of the research on the success and failure of Internet censorship connotes a strong Cold War mentality, which takes the so-called Great Firewall as the contemporary version of the Iron Curtain. Yet, for one thing, the liberal democratic thinking that conflates freedom of speech with democracy is problematic in itself, as democracy is often linked with the marketplace, while freedom of expression is equated with free circulation of commodity in this line of argument (Zhao quoting Mattelart, 2003). For another, the democratization framework fails to acknowledge the complexity of China's past and present. China's revolutionary past has rendered the authoritarian state historically grounded legitimacy, so one should not assume an antithetical relationship between the regime and the Chinese people (Zhao, 2009). In addition, the highly stratified contemporary Chinese society sees significant digital divides among various social groups. If the majority of Chinese people cannot even get online, how can we expect the Internet to democratize?

Second, the democratization approach takes a rather limited view on power and control, which are believed to rest only with the authoritarian state. Censorship might be the most obvious form of information control when it comes to China, but is far from being the only form. Among the four modalities of control that Lessig (2006) identified in his discussion of cyberspace — law, market, norm, and architecture — the majority do not have to be exerted by the state. In fact, unequal power distribution infuses both structural and processual aspects of new media, hence the inequality of accessing and utilizing information. As Mansell points out,

the production and consumption of new media in their commodity form means that scarcity has to be created by, for example, the use of copyright, controlling access, promotion of obsolescence, creation and sale of audiences and by favouring some kinds of new media over others. (2004, p. 98)

Here, by referring to a company that makes money through "defending rights" on information networks, I give one example of how copyright can act as an effective mechanism of information control.

San Mianxiang (Triple-orientations) is a company that specializes in publishing and copyright management. Zhan Qizhi, the founder of the company, is said to be outraged by rampant piracy in China

and to have spotted a unique business opportunity in "defending copyright." Starting in 2005, *San Mianxiang* would first sign contracts with individual authors to purchase the exclusive digital-format distribution rights for their work. The company chose to approach academics and up-and-coming Internet authors with the promise of compiling their articles into anthologies in hard copy, and thus, they could usually have the rights transferred at a low cost. *San Mianxiang* would then sue whatever Web sites would repost those articles for copyright infringement, requesting monetary compensation. By April 2008, *San Mianxiang* had purchased the exclusive distribution rights for about 1,000 articles from more than 150 authors, and the company had initiated hundreds of lawsuits against infringing Web sites, most of which are non-commercial in nature. Although the compensation that *San Mianxiang* requests is not usually a large amount of money (an average of RMB 6,000 ~ US\$900 per article), it has, so far, proven to be lucrative enough for the company and sufficiently deterring for those Web sites. For example, after being sued by *San Mianxiang*, China Rural Studies Networks (<http://www.ccrs.org.cn/>) had to post a disclaimer that the Web site would stop publishing articles by all those authors who had signed contracts with *San Mianxiang*. Here, we see an extreme version of commodifying information and knowledge for the sole purpose of making profit. Such a practice is sanctioned by a copyright law that is deemed to have met the "international standard." The 2001 Copyright Law of China recognizes that partial or entire copyright is transferrable via contract, while the 2006 Regulation of Copyright on Information Networks stipulates that distribution of creative content on the Internet requires permission from, as well as remuneration to, copyright owners. But the question is, does this practice contribute to the "free flow of information," or is it, rather, leading to the enclosure of the information commons?

Closely connected with its limited view on power, the democratization approach also entails a narrow understanding of politics, one that focuses on the formal politics of the state. However, if we recognize the multiple sites of power struggle, the exercise of politics also proliferates. A case in point is the recently emerged *e gao* (which translates literally as "reckless doing") phenomena on the Chinese Internet. *E gao* generally includes all types of audio, visual, or textual spoofs, which often take advantage of the transformative capability of digital technology, as well as the distribution power of the Internet (Meng, 2009b). Although *e gao* activities may appear to be rather incoherent or even chaotic, they represent innovative strategies for articulating social critique and fostering societal dialogue in a heavily controlled speech environment. As Thornton points out, "political opportunity structures" differ widely across the political spectrum (2002, p. 663); dissenters in repressive authoritarian regimes face much more limited resources for disseminating their views than dissenters in a democratic environment. Granted that participants in *e gao* do not form a coherent dissenting group due to their dispersed practices, they do face similar structural constraints when trying to engage in political discussions, hence their shared appreciation of spoofing tactics. The playful and often arational texts of *e gao* are partially born out of the difficulty of conducting serious rational debate on the Chinese Internet. Meanwhile, the comedic effects produced by these spoofs can have political connotations, as they satirize those who possess the power to define the parameters of appropriate speech (Meng, 2009a). It is perhaps over-interpretation to say that *e gao* is a manifestation of the Internet acting as a democratizing force, but the political implications of such a practice are still undeniable. Even with the Google incident mentioned at the beginning of this article, Chinese netizens were quick to come up with parody sites (e.g., <http://www.goojje.com/>) as ways to respond to and comment on the issue.

Last but not least, the democratization approach tends to brush over the experience of average Internet users in terms of how they negotiate a mediated communication space on a daily basis. One current research project I am conducting is to investigate a rarely discussed, yet very influential, online community on the Chinese Internet known as subtitle groups (*Zimu Zu*). *Zimu Zu* translate and release subtitles for P2P-shared foreign-language media content. For millions of Chinese audience members downloading foreign programs via P2P file sharing, their daily media consumption depends on the volunteer work of subtitle group members. These groups boast a wide range of language expertise, including English, Japanese, Korean, French, Italian, and German, just to name some major languages. For the most popular content, the turnover time (time lapse between the show's world premiere and the availability of its subtitled version on the Chinese Internet) can be as short as six hours.

A wide range of research questions can be asked here, none of which are directly linked to the issue of democratization. At the micro level, we can explore the possible motivations for Internet users to participate in the volunteer work of information production and distribution without monetary incentives, which seem to run against the common understanding of "rational behavior" in economic activities. Also, by making foreign media content accessible to Chinese audience, are these groups helping to cultivate a cosmopolitan mentality that knows no boundary in cultural products? Or are they reinforcing the stratification of media consumption and further segregating young urban audiences who are avid consumers of American TV shows from other social groups? At the meso level, it would also be interesting to study the organization and coordination of these groups, which are conducted online and rely on a loosely formed hierarchy. The unequal distribution of power is still at play, even in this P2P network. Does the collaboration among subtitle groups across different countries shed any light on the organization of a common global cause via information networks?¹ Or is it simply another example of online fandom? Furthermore, at the macro level, a large portion of the content shared through P2P networks obviously constitutes copyright infringement, yet occasional Chinese attempts to regulate file sharing are born out of concerns about so-called vulgar (*di su*) content, which usually includes both pornographic and politically sensitive materials, rather than out of concerns about copyright enforcement. Therefore, in the Chinese context, file sharers are trying to negotiate a less-controlled communication space, albeit one with both censorship and copyright regulation (Meng, 2009c). So, can this community offer any counter-hegemonic discourses on culture production? For example, what of the notion of a cultural commons that emphasizes sharing and participation?

Again, my argument so far is not to suggest that we should stop examining new media in China through the lens of democratization, but rather to point out what we could be missing if we become too occupied with that perspective. Moving beyond an instrumental approach that focuses on the *impact* or *influence* of the Internet on Chinese society, I find the sociological term *mediation* helpful in conceiving a

¹ During my interviews with those volunteering group members, one of them described to me, with great excitement, the group's collaboration with similar teams in France and Italy. Within a particular country, subtitle groups compete fiercely with each other in the speed as well as quality of their release. Across national boundaries, groups share with their international partners the newest copy of the most popular show.

more comprehensive research agenda. Building upon the work of Thompson (1995) and Martin-Barbero (1993), Roger Silverstone (2005) calls media scholars' attention to this "fundamentally dialectic notion," elaborating that

[M]ediation requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption. (p. 189)

Silverstone highlights power as the key dimension in studying mediation, both in terms of media power, which is exercised at the conjunction of political, economic, and symbolic power, and in terms of other sources of power that interact with media. Quoting Thompson, he suggests thinking of power as "the differential capacity to mobilize meaning" (p. 191) that can only be studied in particular sociohistoric contexts. I see the implications this discussion has for China Internet research as the following:

First, the institutional arrangement of the Internet in China, including issues related to information infrastructure, copyright regulation, or censorship, is both embedded in and reshaping the specific Chinese context of political-economic and social contentions. Attempts to control the Internet come from various sources of power, including both the state and the market, yet such control has to be constantly negotiated through technological features of the Internet as a medium. For example, the decentralized structure of the Internet has prompted the evolution of a decentralized regulatory model that combines self-censorship, market-based differentiation, and government policy (Zhao, 2008). Any research trying to investigate the enabling or empowering potential of the Internet would have to take into consideration the environment that mediates those potentials.

Second, mediation also takes place at the symbolic level, in terms of who gets to participate in communication on the Internet, how they represent themselves or are being represented, and how such participation and representation feeds back to inclusions or exclusions in the offline world, both local and global. The much-discussed topic of cyber nationalism (Wu, 2007; Zhou, 2006), for example, invites our reflection not only on the historical, social, and cultural contexts that contribute to the emergence of such phenomena, but also on how the nationalism discourses are mediated by specific features of the Internet to become either amplified or polarized. The voices that are silenced in this vociferous conversation are just as important as those that are accentuated.

Third, as a means of communication that mediates lives of individuals, the Internet is not just opening up more *space* for interaction, but also contributes to the formation of new discursive modes and communicative practices. That is to say, news Web sites, online forums, chat rooms, and blogs do not simply extend offline communication into the virtual world; they could transform the ways in which conversations are conducted. The motivation and level of commitment of those who take part in *e gao* practice or peer-to-peer information production may vary, and they do not necessarily share a pre-conceived coherent agenda. But it is during the communication processes mediated by the Internet that

they could develop new ways of relating to each other and new orientation toward the society they are living in.

Needless to say, the mediating power of the Internet at all three levels, namely the institutional, the symbolic, and the individual, are interrelated. It is a daunting challenge for researchers to connect them in the contentious environment of contemporary China. But that is also what makes our career exciting.



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