Moral goodness and social orderliness: An analysis of the official media discourse about Internet governance in China

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A B S T R A C T

The rapid expansion of the Internet in China has seen a concomitant rise in government regulation. While most existing studies have approached this issue from a technical or institutional perspective, few have examined how China's official media discourses work to legitimize its Internet governance. Based on a content and discourse analysis of 301 articles published by China Communist Party's central mouthpiece, *People's Daily* (2000–2014), this study explores how Internet governance is discursively constituted and practiced in China. The findings suggest that China's state-run media consistently justifies Internet governance on the basis of moral goodness, personal security, and social stability. Over the years, official media discourse has changed from viewing the Internet as a technological space with potential moral and security concerns to treating it as a destabilizing field of contentions. The findings also demonstrate the ways in which China's Internet governance framework is evolving in step with the pace of technological change.

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1. Introduction

After a decade of exponential growth of the Internet, the number of Internet users in China has now reached 668 million, accounting for nearly half (48.8%) of the total population (CNNIC, 2015). This figure also reveals the magnitude of China's online presence on a global scale: more Internet users live in China than in any other nation. However, this rapid expansion of Internet usage has not gone unchecked; rather, it has been accompanied by increasing government regulation (Jiang, 2010; Yang, 2013). It is generally agreed upon that China's approach to Internet governance has also become increasingly sophisticated and multidimensional over the years (e.g., Hao, Zhang, & Huang, 1996; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Kalathil & Boas, 2010; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Li, 2009; Tsui, 2003; Yang, 2013).

While the majority of existing studies on Internet governance in China focus on its institutional and technical dimensions, this study employs a media discourse approach to examine how the Internet is regulated by Chinese authorities. The approach is based in part on Fairclough's (1995, 2010), concept of *media discourse analysis*. According to him, the production of media discourse is a process whereby power manifests and reproduces itself. An analysis of media discourse can therefore reveal the ways in which Internet governance is discursively and ideologically constituted in an online setting, while further shedding light on how state power is involved in the process. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, an analysis of

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state-run Chinese media discourse will help us better understand its objectives and rationale. This is essential, because Internet governance in China cannot be explained merely in terms of institutional and technical strategies. Instead, and as others have agreed (e.g., Li, 2009; Jiang, 2010; Yang, 2013), it is inextricably bound to proactive discourses production whose primary aim is to both justify and normalize governmental control over the Internet.

This study explores how state-sponsored media discourses about Internet governance in China are constructed. More specifically, it aims to identify the major themes in these discourses, examine how they have evolved over the years, and describe their interactions. To achieve this, 301 articles published by *People's Daily* over the past 15 years were analyzed. *People's Daily* is the Chinese Communist Party's central mouthpiece and most important disseminator of domestic policy; it is also widely regarded as an accurate reflection of the viewpoints and agendas held by China's high-ranking leaders. The data presented in this paper were generated via a methodology that combined quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis of *People's Daily* with the express purpose of elucidating these viewpoints and agendas.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internet governance in China

According to Yang (2013, pp. 47–51), China's Internet governance plan has gone through three major stages since its formation in 1994. Between 1994 and 1999, its main focus involved establishing administrative and legal frameworks to address online security issues and Internet service provisions. During the second stage (2000–2002), the focus shifted toward implementing content regulations that targeted both Internet content providers and individual users. In 2003, China's Internet governance entered its third stage, in which government control over the Internet was strengthened as well as expanded to become more comprehensive and up-to-date. Yang, (2013) argues that it was at this stage that Internet control was transformed from pure government to *governance* – or even *governmentality* – through which a wide range of official and non-official institutions, rules, and practices were implemented in tandem in order to achieve a synergy effect.

Yang (2013) was not the only researcher to argue that China's method of Internet governance operates in multiple dimensions. For example, Tsui (2003) (see also Lessig, 1999) identified four modalities of Internet governance in China: (1) the law, (2) the market, (3) social norms, and (4) the architecture. Another study, conducted by Harwitt and Clark (2001), revealed two important aspects of Chinese Internet regulation: physical network control and network content control. And in his systematic account, Li (2009) further supported the multidimensionality of Chinese governance by demonstrating the ways in which it influences the spatial, temporal, and technical components of the Internet, as well as the array of social actors needed to sustain this system, including the central government, legislative bodies, local authorities, network operators, content providers, and individual Internet users. This type of comprehensive governance requires the mobilization of all of these social actors in a complex interactive network. In spite of such complexity, however, it is possible to divide China's Internet governance into technical and non-technical aspects for the sake of discussion.

In terms of non-technical governance, the institutional framework China already had in place to implement and enforce laws, policies, and other regulations relating to information and media (Kalathil & Boas, 2001; Liang & Lu, 2010; Tsui, 2003; Yang, 2013) was adjusted to include cyberspace, almost at the moment of its inception (Hao et al., 1996; Jiang, 2010; Tsui, 2003). Content censorship is an integral part of this framework, and is maintained through a combination of self-censorship and human intervention (Li, 2009; Liang & Lu, 2010). Self-censorship is required from all Chinese Internet users, including content providers. Internet businesses must comply with government regulations and carefully scrutinize the content they provide in order to maintain normal operations and avoid prosecution (Deva, 2007; Liang & Lu, 2010; MacKinnon, 2007). Human intervention, on the other hand, refers to so-called online commentators who are charged with actively censoring online content and opinions as they appear in real time (Jiang, 2010; King et al., 2013; Li, 2009; Yang, 2013). Non-technical Internet regulations are imposed outside of cyberspace as well, the most prominent example of which is the nationwide crackdown on Internet cafés (e.g., Qiu, 2009).

China's Internet governance is also imposed through technical (i.e. technological) means. The so-called *Great Firewall* is one such example, and was developed to block access to any content posted from outside of China that the government deemed harmful (Li, 2009; Tsui, 2003). The Chinese government has also taken control of basic physical access to the Internet (Harwitt & Clark, 2001), and occasionally funds and promotes Internet surveillance systems, such as the *Golden Shield* project, to scrutinize content from a variety of sources (Liang & Lu, 2010). Keyword-based automated content filtering and deletion systems have been in use for some time now as well, and monitor a wide range of online platforms, especially more recent Internet applications which allow users to create their own content (Jiang, 2010; King et al., 2013; Xiao, 2011).

2.2. Discourses about Internet Governance in China

First, there exist morality-based discourses about Internet governance in China. Jiang (2010) argued that state control and regulation of the Internet in China has been gradually legitimized among the populace by reframing it as an obligation to protect people from moral corruption. The state also conducts *thought work* to justify their ideological pursuits (e.g., the Three Representatives and the Harmonious Society), and appeals to its alleged connection with China's traditional cultures, particularly Confucianism, in order to further cement its authority. Together, these tactics establish a perceived linkage