



The many faces of (soft) power, democracy and the Internet

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Soft power
E-democracy
Peer-to-peer
Internet
Censorship

ABSTRACT

Starting from a brief roundup of the correlation between ICTs and politics in Asia, and especially China, this introduction to a special issue on China explores a number of the more political and technological issues related to power and the Internet. It highlights some opportunities and dangers from a democratic technology perspective.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

“It doesn’t matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice”

Deng Xiaoping

“The most basis premises of China’s approach is that reforms must be pragmatic and build on local circumstances”

Peerenboom (2008: 295)

1. Democracy in Asia

The Asian political landscape presents a variety of systems and models ranging from authoritarian ones on one extreme and relatively developed democratic systems on the other (see Held, 1987, 1993 for a theoretical overview; Gunaratne, 2000; Morlino et al., 2011; Rodrik, 2011; or Rondinelli and Heffron, 2007 for an Asian typology). Consequently, policies related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are invariably among the most politically sensitive in most countries. However, “with the development of global networks, governments will have to deal with a complex mix of forces representing the state, business, technology and the citizen. . . . Needless to say, the new information technology will defy the traditional forms of state control such as direct censorship” (Goonasekera and Chun Wah, 2001: XIV). Indrajit Banerjee (2003) is even more outspoken: “Asia is still discovering the Internet and issues of access, in a larger sense of the term, of censorship and regulation, and de-politicization and self-censorship still restrict the political impact of the Internet in Asia. The relative immaturity of Asian democracies themselves constitutes an important impediment to greater public and political debate, participation and the promotion of civil and political liberties. Notwithstanding these limitations, the Internet has, to a limited extent, provided for an expanded political and public sphere and the voicing of alternative political views. In a context where the mass media has often been strictly controlled by the state, the Internet offers a new channel of communication, a new voice, a new hope for those who have been marginalized and prevented from participating in the political process” (Banerjee, 2003: 22).

He therefore predicts that “the Internet will completely break down political control and pose a threat to all authoritarian regimes” (Banerjee, 2003: 11). Assessing the arguments and findings of a number of political scientists and Internet researchers he identifies correlations between the Internet and democratisation, and between network connectivity and political freedom. Similar arguments have been developed by, inter alia, Norris (2002, 2010), Shirazi et al. (2010) or UNDP (2004) in general, and Zheng (2007) for China. Put in political terms, this leads to statements like this one by the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton: “We need to work toward a world in which access to networks and information brings people closer together and expands the definition of the global community” (Clinton, 2010).

2. Modernization, the Chinese way

Most of these authors, implicitly or explicitly, start from a perspective on the role and place of communication for development or social change that is grounded in the so-called *modernization paradigm* (Servaes, 1999, 2008). The modernization paradigm has long been avowed on both ends of the ideological spectrum, both by the classic liberal and neo-liberal theorists like Keynes as well as by the classic Marxist thinkers. In this regard, both ideologies have a lot in common. The differences in approach lie on the level of the means, the relative role that is assigned to the market versus the state. But the objective is the same: development on the basis of a Western vision of growth and progress. The obstacles for development are indicated only in the traditional sectors of a society and are initially only attacked with economic means.

Where liberals try to achieve development by means of a massive transfer of capital and technology to the so-called Third World, the classic Marxists strive for state intervention, the stimulation of the public sector, and the establishment of the heavy industry as an initial step in the development process – in other words, development according to the Soviet model (Galtung, 1980; Sparks, 2007).

Some scholars (Bartolovich and Lazarus, 2007; Chang, 2008) claim that even in Mao's China this view on development was of great importance. Since the revolution there have been two ideological lines. The first stands for a highly centralized, technocratic guidance of society towards modernization; the second line is based upon the elimination of the so-called *Three Great Differences* (that is, city versus country, mental versus manual labour, worker versus peasant), a collective functioning on the basis of mass democracy, and self-reliance. These authors state that these lines continue to guide the Chinese development process in apparently 'non-antagonistic' contradiction. With Deng Xiaoping's focus on the four modernizations – agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology – the Western perspective became more explicit as the example. However the management of these modernizations remained largely Chinese: "An unprecedented partnership between a communist party and capitalist business holds. It remains an uneasy, unstable and unholy alliance, but an alliance nonetheless that, in the short term, has turned more than a century of conventional wisdom on its head. It may have taken decades, but a broad consensus has now developed at the top of the Party, that far from harming socialism, entrepreneurs, properly managed and leashed to the state, are the key to saving it" (McGregor, 2011: 197–198; see also Jacques, 2012; Peerenboom, 2008).

Song Shi, in this special issue, assesses how the modernization discourse has seeped into the rationale of Chinese civil society organizations and their use of Web2.0 technologies. As is the case for the general modernization dichotomy between 'developed' and 'less developed' sectors and regions, he finds similar forms of regional inequality in the adoption of Web2.0 style technologies. His findings confirm those by Fulda et al. (2012) who observed an incremental change from government control (*guanzhi*) to public management (*guanli*) and to network governance (*zhili*).

3. Power and its disguises

In all societies, power is based on two main fundaments. The very first is the naked "political power (that) grows out of the barrel of a gun", a famous quote attributed to Mao Zedong. No social order can persist without the monopoly of military might that is entrusted to the state. One only has to refer to the past or recent events in Iraq or Afghanistan to find sad examples for such a claim.

The second important factor is the consent of the governed. Both elements are needed to achieve a stable social order. No government can survive based on might alone and this is particularly so in democratic societies, where the consent of the governed has to be explicitly given every few years during more or less democratically organised elections. The important question is: how can one achieve such consent?

An answer to this question leads to the problem of power and the legitimization of power relationships. Each social order can be characterized by an interrelated division between an (economic) base and an (ideological and symbolic) superstructure. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1979) the dominant classes call upon an ideological and symbolic preponderance not only to maintain their position in the social hierarchy but also to justify it. This system has a '*symbolic power*' because it is capable of construing reality in a directed manner. Its symbolic power does not lie in the symbolic system itself, but in the social relationships between those who exercise the power and those who are subject to it. Symbolic power functions mainly 'unconsciously' as the legitimization criterion for the existing social and economic power relationships and creates 'myths' and 'ways of life'. So, in reality, not only normative, but also and especially power factors play a role in policy and planning, and certainly when it comes to confirming and carrying out policy recommendations (Burawoy, 2012).

The traditional interpretation of the power concept refers to material or immaterial perceived possessions in a narrow as well as a broad meaning, that is, a property or possession that is handled by actors in a mainly intentional, direct or indirect manner. Max Weber's definition which describes power as the capability of one individual or social group to impose its will, despite the objections of others, is often quoted in this context. One can find such a static perception in different functionalist as well as classic-Marxist theories. In such definitions power is one-sidedly situated with the so-called 'power holders.' Their position of power rests on a conflict relationship that can only be 'resolved' by consensus on one side or by struggle on the other (Servaes, 1981).

Critical social-philosophers and post-structuralists have pointed out the limitations of such a power concept. Michel Foucault (1980), Anthony Giddens, and Jürgen Habermas, for example, state that the relationship between power and conflict is

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/464456>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/464456>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)