

The Internet in China: a liberating force?

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If you are seeking information about the key issues and trends of Internet development in China, the second largest national cyberspace in the world, then this book provides a good starting point. Much of what is said here is already history: such is the danger of writing about the fast developing world of cyberspace. The number and profiles of users and the official countermeasures deployed to control them change daily. What might have appeared as a 'hot topic' (a somewhat over-used term in several chapters) in the early 2000s, when most research for this book was carried out, is by now superseded by something else.

However, there is still much valuable material here that makes the book worth reading. Most chapters address the struggles and compromises between the state, at both the local and national levels, and business, both national and international, as well as the impact of globalisation. Questions about e-commerce and e-government and the controversial subjects of content and censorship are also raised, while who, or what, is leading the race into cyberspace in contemporary China is an underlying theme throughout.

The articles that comprise this volume can be seen as detailed snapshots of the situation in the early 2000s. In chapter one, editors Jens Damm and Simona Thomas provide a useful introduction with relevant background information about technological changes. Contextualising the Chinese Internet boom and how it might affect political arrangements, they acknowledge that the technological determinism view might prevail but explore some of the concrete social and political effects.

Bloggers and P2P networkers: a 'netizen' liberation force?

In fact, politics is the main question at the centre of this edited volume: to what extent will the Internet's rapid technological development bring about political change in China? Every chapter seems to address this question, which makes the book an engaging read. Under a still authoritarian regime, cyberspace might appear to be a democratic realm with 'liberating' effects on the populace. Some commentators argue that official controls over the media have already softened and see this as a continuing trend. Others, such as Chase et al., write that, 'Technology alone is unlikely to motivate political change in China' (p.93), because more direct political changes are required to diminish centralised control. Technology might drive some changes, but on its own it cannot determine political reform in China.

Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark focus on government policy and political control over the Internet over the past decade. They provide quality background information, facts and figures about the 'typical'

Internet user and debunk the idea that the Internet is a 'liberating' force: whilst the number of users runs into the tens of millions, they hardly represent the whole population. Internet access remains limited, and most users are young, male and likely to be living in large cities or developed coastal regions.

One of the most pertinent chapters in terms of newsworthiness is Johan Lagerkvist's 'In the crossfire of demands: Chinese news portals between propaganda and the public'. Here we read about the increasingly important role played by bloggers or 'netizens' in news-gathering and dissemination. Technology and globalisation have broken down strict controls over the traditional news media,

Nina Hachigan. They address the impact of the P2P phenomenon on the balance of power between the state and its citizens. The basis premise is that P2P networks bypass centralised servers, thus providing freer networking and the possibility to exchange possibly contentious material and information. The researchers predict that 'P2P technology will undermine the ability of authorities, be they corporations or governments, to control content or its distribution' (p.65). They provide examples of citizens exchanging information about actual events in China, especially during times of crisis. For example, mainline users can read *The Tiananmen Papers*, which are deemed politically sensitive and yet have been made available to those linked to P2P networks. The researchers also raise inter-

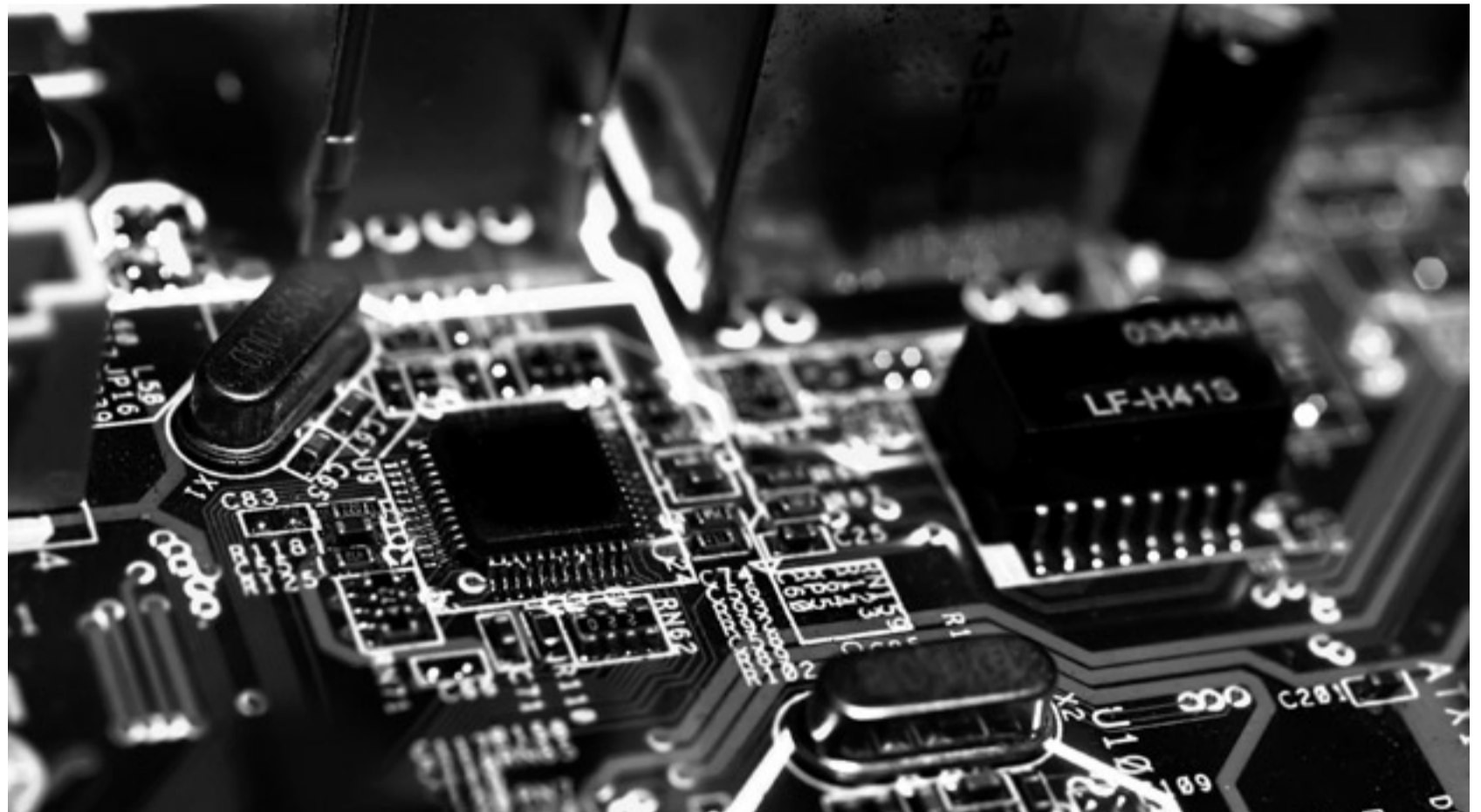
surveillance, self-censorship, the fear of getting caught and arrested is enough to deter some potential users from straying onto contentious sites, be they political or pornographic. And no matter how huge the Chinese Internet audience may seem, it is not a universal phenomenon; so many are still outside of this revolution because cyberspace is far from accessible to all.

Not just politics

Many Chinese, of course, don't necessarily use the Internet because they're obsessed with politics and want to see regime change. Several authors cite entertainment as motivating Internet use, a salutary reminder of what we ourselves do in the West when we access the Internet: chat with friends or strangers, view film

provides commentary by Internet content producers, audiences and audience-producers. The book is also worth reading for the problems encountered while trying to conduct research on the Internet in China. For example, Jens Damm's case studies of e-government in Guangdong and Fujian not only provide useful data about how local government uses new technology; they are also fine models of how to conduct such research.

Some chapters would have benefited from drawing upon media and cultural theory more directly and comprehensively. The discussion of bloggers, netizens and P2P networks, for example, struck me as being quite relevant to Fiske's uncited work on semiotic democracy. Readers must fill in



and the possibilities for ordinary citizens to present alternative versions of the news to official websites is explored here. Again, the key question about the web's liberating effect is addressed but the conclusions are mixed. Web users exercise a degree of self-censorship and discipline their use of sites that might be deemed controversial or as containing unacceptable material. It would appear that old habits die hard and the fear of punishment can be enough to limit cyberspace freedom. Additionally, Lagerkvist concludes that the general public still trusts the official news media more than unofficial ones, though the wider Chinese audience outside of China, which is also a key player, undoubtedly differs.

Specific information on bloggers, 'comrade to comrade networks' and peer to peer (P2P) networks is presented by Michael Chase, James Mulvenon and

esting points about the limitations of P2P networks, including self-censorship and official technological countermeasures. The conclusions are once again mixed: technology does create the potential for freer exchange of information among citizens, but some restraints remain and technology itself can be a limiting factor, such as slow Internet speeds and lack of access. Technological processes and networks are examined in perhaps too much detail, as the lay reader will find the excessive jargon difficult to absorb.

All authors concur that the Internet has to some extent weakened some controls, as cyberspace is harder to police than traditional media. But they also cite the Internet's limitations and how the government always finds a way to respond to technological advances. Surveillance remains in place, and sometimes self-

clips and shows or download music. As Harwit and Clark point out, 'many current chat groups seem to contain rather bland discussions' (p.33). Sports, travel, games and food seem to motivate chat, rather than more serious topics. Simona Thomas addresses one of the key forces driving China's Internet expansion, the desire to increase business and commerce, reminding us once again that the Internet is not only about politics. Meanwhile, Xie Kang's relatively short 'Industrialization supported by Informatization' provides some good context, but reads as though out of place in this volume.

The book in general offers examples of strong research methodology. Statistical data, surveys and samples are employed, and primary interview data is liberally featured in fields such as the media. The interview material is particularly valuable, as it

theoretical gaps for themselves, as this is very much an issue-based and fact-finding project. Overall, however, the book will interest students and teachers of contemporary Chinese politics, culture, economics and media. It is also of value to general media studies researchers and scholars, because while the trends in China occur within their own specific circumstances, globalisation makes them applicable elsewhere. Those who want to know more about news media, entertainment and politics in China, and those who desire insight on how to conduct such research for themselves, should read this book.

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