

**A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF INFORMATION:  
MEDIA AND THE DILEMMA OF STATE POWER IN CHINA**

By

MICHAEL L. MILLER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
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## Abstract

A Political Ecology of Information:  
Media and The Dilemma of State Power in China

By

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In this dissertation, I employ a Weberian concept of social power in order to theorize the challenges posed by, and the varieties of state response to, the dilemma of state power: the need of all states to empower societies with social capacities that may, in turn, threaten state interests. Through a comparison of traditional and new forms of media in China, I show that rather than posing qualitatively new types of challenges to authoritarian states, new media exacerbate the dilemma of state power. They do so because along each of three dimensions of social control, new media shift the relationship between social actors and the means of social power away from conditions most conducive to state intervention. Although the state's most comprehensive interventions into society are direct, centralized, and preemptive, exercised over social capacities that are expropriated, concentrated, and dependent, new media engender conditions in which critical social capacities—to author, publish, distribute, or consume media content—are held privately, diffusely, and may be employed more independently.

Case studies from China support my contention that the kinds of interventions states make in order to control political speech reflect interactions between states and social actors constrained by distinct features of the various media ecologies within which media are

employed. These interventions vary, not simply between new and traditional forms of media, but also among the traditional media and, indeed, within them. Thus, lessons about how control would be exercised over new media were foreshadowed by how control was exercised over traditional forms of media.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 21st century, the world seemed destined, not simply to turn a page to a new chapter, but to open the first pages of a new book. The “Information Revolution,” brought about by the development of the Internet and advances in computer processors, would transform passive consumers into the authors, curators, and publishers of mass-mediated content. This revolution promised new "virtual" realities where people could recreate themselves outside the strictures of cultural norms, legal regulations, and political borders. This revolution heralded new ways of organizing social and political life that would shift power away from large, hierarchical organizations toward diffuse networks of autonomous individuals. This revolution would change everything.

Yet short of a decade into the new millennium, a new literature began to question the liberating promise of new media. Events such as the Iranian government’s explicit use of social media to identify and repress activists during the 2009 Green Movement or revelations of a "Great Firewall" used to cordon off China’s Internet users from significant parts of the broader Internet led many to doubt whether new media were, in fact, “liberation technologies” or whether “clicktivism,” the use of social media to promote a cause, was actually dissuading people from participating in genuine, real-world activism (Gladwell 2010). Even on the heels of the Arab Spring, where political movements made explicit use of social media, revelations of dragnet surveillance in the United States compel us to reflect upon the nature of the changes we have witnessed thus far.

How can we reconcile the sense that recent innovations in media technology have empowered diffuse networks of social actors *and* augmented state power vis-à-vis society?

How have these changes impacted the ways that states attempt to exercise control over political speech? Which traditional modes of control have persisted, which have been innovated, and which have been jettisoned?

In this dissertation, I employ a comparison of several media in China in order to theorize the challenges posed by, and the variety of state responses to, recent innovations in media technology. Although new media pose challenges to would-be censors, they do not necessarily pose qualitatively new challenges. Instead, new media raise the stakes in what is a more fundamental dilemma, often mischaracterized as “the dictator’s dilemma.” The dictator’s dilemma is a term used to characterize the challenges faced by rulers who have a need, on the one hand, to control political speech while, on the other, allowing the autonomous production and dissemination of essential media goods, such as news, literature, and cultural goods. However, such challenges are neither restricted to authoritarian regimes, nor to the sphere of media. Rather, the duties of modern states increasingly include providing a range of resources and services designed to empower citizens to participate in the economy, in politics, or in the production of ideas and culture. In pursuit of these ends, states may be obligated to provision societies with—or refrain from interfering with the private development of—social power resources that can potentially be used in ways that threaten perceived state or national interests. I refer to this phenomenon as the dilemma of state power.

The dilemma of state power is particularly salient with respect to versatile means of social power—those that are easily repurposed as either political, economic, or ideological means of power. When social power resources can be put to multiple and varied uses, it is difficult—even undesirable—for political leaders to justify their wholesale expropriation from the private sphere. Furthermore, insofar as the widespread, private, and autonomous use of

versatile forms of social power are boons to economic or cultural production, states may be obliged to tie their own hands. States are, therefore, faced with hard choices about how to manage the use of media, which, I will argue, are archetypically versatile means of social power.

In this chapter, I begin by summarizing the literature on the political impact of new media. I then attempt to situate the transformations to media currently underway in the context of media transformations historically and their effects on the distribution of power throughout society, generally, and between the state and society, specifically. To this end, it is necessary that I take space to address my approach to the concepts of media and the state. I take these subjects up, in turn, below.

### **Internet Revolution and Retreat**

The Internet was designed to provide the US military with a communications infrastructure capable of withstanding a coordinated nuclear attack. This capacity is achieved via a component of the Internet's design known as the "end-to-end principle." The end-to-end principle states that all of the Internet's functionality should remain at the "ends" of the network. That is, the technical capacity to produce, distribute, consume, and store data should remain on computers that connect to the network and should not be embedded in the network itself. The network should remain "neutral," unconcerned, as it were, with the content of data or the identity and physical location of end-users. Furthermore, since information is a non-rivalrous resource—the consumption of information does not reduce its quantity—there can be, and often is, a great amount of redundancy on the network in terms of where data are physically stored.

Some notable consequences follow from the end-to-end principle. If one or many nodes in the network is destroyed, the likelihood of information loss across the entire network is low, and the likelihood that the remaining nodes will be able to establish communication is high. The ability of individual end-users to establish relatively direct connections has led information theorists to distinguish this type of network as distributed (or “rhizomatic”) as opposed to centralized or decentralized (Galloway 2004; Baran 1962). A centralized network is one in which one central hub connects to each peripheral node in the network and each peripheral node only connects to the central hub. Decentralized networks consist of multiple hubs, each with its own set of peripheral nodes. Any node may be connected to multiple hubs, but not to other peripheral nodes. An example of a decentralized network is the network of airports in the U.S. One can fly directly from New York (hub) to Chicago (hub), but to get from New York City to Chattanooga (peripheral node), one must transfer at a more proximate hub.

One consequence of centralized and even decentralized network structures is that power tends to accrue to and consolidate within hubs by virtue of their importance in connecting nodes in the network. That is, centralized and decentralized networks are hierarchical. Furthermore, a break between any two points in the hierarchy implies a break between the higher point and all subordinate points. So, for example, if John F. Kennedy Airport were to shut down for a day, the effect on the functioning of the national airport network would be far greater than if Chattanooga Airport were to shut down. That is, JFK’s centrality in the network makes it a much more important or powerful node.

Distributed networks are distinct for two reasons then. (1) Information is not centralized—there is no central hub through which information must pass to get to its destination, but rather innumerable distinct routes. (2) Given this redundancy in potential



connections, distributed networks are non-hierarchical. Since no single node is a hub through which all data must pass, all nodes are peripheral, and power does not accrue due to a node's position in the network. The most significant consequence of this structure is that the network is, as designed, resistant to the kinds of attacks that might be coordinated against a centralized, hierarchical network.

Many early theories of the Internet assumed that these qualities would limit or, ultimately, end states' abilities to control flows of information within society online (Johnson and Post 1996; Barlow 1996). For the same reasons that the Internet was resistant to a centralized attack, it was thought to be resistant to centralized control. So long as the network remained neutral, activity on the Internet would remain autonomous and anonymous, enabling widespread expression of, and exposure to, information of all kinds. The Internet, it was argued, could not be regulated and, thus, the state was powerless within this sphere (Negroponte 1995).

The Internet even promised a model for alternative *modes* of governance. David Clark, one of the architects of the Internet, suggested that specific values were embedded and reflected in the protocols that defined how computers connected to the Internet must operate, as well as in the mechanisms by which they were designed and implemented. "We reject: kings, presidents, and voting. We believe in: rough consensus and running code" (Clark 1992). In other words, the solutions to problems of the Internet would not be resolved by ballot or by edict, but by mechanisms of consensus among interested parties: computer geeks. According to John Perry Barlow, this was because solutions on the Internet must win "by virtue of adoption ... they don't get adopted if they're bad solutions" (Barlow 2000). Again, since it was argued that the Internet resisted control, collective decisions would *have* to be made by alternative means.

The Internet would also change the rules of politics [replacing] voting, legislation, and territorial representation with flexible, consensus-driven rules, created by informal communities organized by interest and expertise rather than the arbitrary condition of location (Goldsmith and Wu 2006, p. 25).

But as law scholar Lawrence Lessig (2006) has argued, the mistake of first generation optimists was to take the architecture of the Internet as given, even natural. Proceeding from the assumption that the Internet would remain, ineluctably, as it was designed, many had come to untenable conclusions about its liberating potential. Yet, even without altering the end-to-end principle, mechanisms of regulation had begun to emerge. In fact, the first regulatory mechanisms emerged in the field of commerce. Companies wanting to sell goods online needed to save information about end-users so that transactions did not disappear as customers moved from one screen to the next, and thus applications that sat on top of the Internet's basic architecture were needed to store information about individual end-users ("cookies"). Control was, thus, made possible despite the Internet's design. Furthermore, control was not simply a political interest. Economic actors—corporations and consumers—had vested interests in making the Internet more regulable. And if corporations could devise means of controlling information on the Internet, so could states. Indeed, they were increasingly likely to do so.

In one of the earlier comparative works on the political impact of the Internet, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas (2003) argued that the state, especially within authoritarian regimes, had a marked influence on the use of the Internet. In authoritarian regimes, the role of the state had been extensive and central in fostering the development of modern Internet infrastructures, as well as in governing their use. Furthermore, regulatory policies often evolved out of frameworks designed to govern older forms of mass communication and, insofar as these

frameworks varied from state to state, their historical roots were important to understand policy development.

[The] state plays a crucial role in charting the development of the Internet in authoritarian regimes and in conditioning the ways it is used by societal, economic, and political actors. Through proactive policies such as instituting e-government and wiring key industries, authoritarian regimes can guide the development of the Internet so that it serves state-defined goals and priorities. This may extend the reach of the state in significant ways, even as other types of Internet usage challenge state authority (Kalathil and Boas 2003).

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is, there were already indications that the Internet was transitioning “from a technology that resists territorial law to one that facilitates its enforcement,” and through the Internet, the state could maintain, even strengthen, its control over society (Goldsmith and Wu 2006, p. 10).

Increasingly, however, Internet theorists have argued for a move beyond debates about whether the state is “obstinate or obsolete,” toward a recognition of the complexity of control. Johan Eriksson and Giampiero Giacomello (2009) suggest that we shouldn’t merely ask “who controls?” but rather ask, “who controls what under what conditions?” The authors note that a variety of types of actors—governments, businesses, NGOs—control various aspects of the Internet, including basic opportunities for *access*, the *functionality* or technical quality of Internet usage, and users’ actual *activity* on the Internet. Furthermore, the nature of the Internet as currently constituted—in particular, the fact that it is a largely privately owned infrastructure that has become an increasingly essential public good—means that the execution of control will unavoidably involve public-private partnerships. As Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain have argued, the “growing centrality of online activities to life

in general” explains why “contests [are] playing themselves out among institutions at all levels of society” (Deibert, et al. 2012, p. 15).

It is important to remember that most of cyberspace is owned and operated by private parties, and its protocols are developed and refined through processes that straddle the public and private [and] many of these companies are moving into spaces of policy deliberation...the same could be said of networks of civil society groups [and thus] a key feature of the [current] period will be the interplay and clash between these often-competing interests and values (Deibert, et al. 2012, p. 17).

In a series of edited volumes on censorship, surveillance, and control on the Internet, Deibert, et al. (2008, 2010, 2012) add that information controls have evolved a great deal over the past decade, and they separate control strategies into three overlapping generations. First-generation controls work by denying access to Internet resources by blocking content on servers, domains, or IP addresses, or by filtering content based on key words. First-generation controls are implemented by inputting instructions at key choke points on the network, such as on backbone routers where information comes into the country from abroad. Second-generation controls attempt to deny access to information resources “as and when needed,” reducing much of the arbitrariness of blocking and filtering, while also reducing the possibility of discovery (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010). Furthermore, laws and regulations specify the conditions under which access can be denied, while blocking and filtering techniques are applied with more discretion, for example, at times when politically sensitive topics are getting significant worldwide attention (Deibert, Palfrey et al. 2010). Third-generation controls focus less on denying access to content and more on propaganda and counter-information campaigns, as well as surveillance as a means of creating cultures of fear, overwhelming, discrediting, and demoralizing opponents (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010).

Although the work of Deibert, et al. was a welcome corrective to some of the earlier, more optimistic conclusions about the political impact of the Internet, it is nevertheless largely descriptive. Their categorization of control strategies is organized on the basis of a chronological, if non-linear, development that leaves open the question why certain states do (or do not) employ various methods of control. Despite a growing awareness of the fact that states are capable of executing control over new media, the reasons why states choose one mode of control over another remain under-theorized. Furthermore, both the early and more recent literatures on new media suffer from a lack of engagement with the broader academic literature on media and on the state. In the remainder of this chapter, I attempt to bridge these two gaps.

### **The Nature of Media**

Communication at physical or temporal distances cannot happen in the absence of a medium. The human voice can travel only so far and for so long; the human ear can only detect sounds within a specific range of frequencies and at certain volumes. The spoken word is necessarily ephemeral, and human memory is necessarily limited. Only by means of material artefacts have humans overcome the limits that time, space, and biology place on our ability to communicate. These technologies—media—both enhance and constrain our ability to communicate, to transmit, and to receive messages and their content: information, ideas, knowledge.

In what follows, I offer a survey of communication and media studies in order to posit a theory and concept of media capable of adaptation to a political context. Three questions motivate the following review of this literature. First, what are the approaches to the study of media? Second, what are media and what do media do? What are the qualities that separate new

forms of media from traditional forms and traditional forms of media from each other? Finally, how are media implicated in the organization of power within society? How do transformations in media technologies affect the distribution of power in society? These last two questions are precisely what this dissertation seeks to investigate and, thus, will be expanded upon further in the next chapter.

### *Approaches to Media Studies*

Nick Couldry (2012) has argued that approaches to media research can be represented as a four-cornered pyramid, each corner designating a possible apex, that is, a different priority for research. First, textual analysis seeks to understand how media texts—films, television programs, sports, music videos, advertisements, etc.—affect meaning. Second, political economy asks how various configurations of ownership across media systems affect the production, distribution, and reception of media products. Political economic approaches to media train their analyses on the level of institutions to understand how media systems affect the distribution of power within society. Third, what is sometimes characterized as “medium theory” is concerned with how the technical features of a given medium constrain—both augment and limit—social interaction. Such a media-as-technology approach is interested in the social effects of innovations in techniques and technologies, variations such as the written vs. the printed word, aural vs. visual media, and so on. Media theorists are often caricatured as “technological determinists,” [assuming] that media have rather linear effects on society. The final corner on the pyramid constitutes Couldry’s preferred approach to media. “Media-as-practice” is concerned with “the

social uses to which media technologies and media content are put" (Couldry 2012, p. 6). As Couldry argues,

there is a big difference between the basic possibilities for using technology and how it comes to be *used in practice* ... Changes in the communication infrastructure we call "media" have always resulted from the intersections between technological, economic, social, and political forces (Couldry 2012, p. 10, 13, italics in original).

The approach taken here follows Couldry in recognizing the non-linear nature of media transformation and the effects of these transformations on the distribution of social power. Social actors use media, but not in any way that they please, nor in the same ways in each social, political, or economic setting. Instead, to paraphrase Karl Marx, media are employed "under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1852). However, although media do not determine social practices, they nevertheless delimit the possibilities of practical application. The mass production of bibles in multiple European vernaculars was simply not possible given the media available in the 13<sup>th</sup> century—ink and vellum. The technical qualities of the medium did, in fact, determine that months of labor were required to produce a single copy of a bible, but the consequence of such a labor-intensive artefact was context specific. In Europe, the effect was that the authorship and (immediate) consumption of holy texts were restricted to a concentrated elite, the clergy, who derived a great deal of power from their oligopoly on the capacity to interpret and assign meaning to real world phenomena. From the fall of Rome until, perhaps, the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such power was on par with (if not greater than) that of any feudal warlord and, significantly, enabled the Church to act as the single unifying institution in Western Civilization (Anderson 1974). These practices, of course, reflect the local social and

political context of medieval Europe, but at a more fundamental level, they reflect the limits and possibilities engendered by the technical qualities of media.

The technical qualities of media are also implicated at a fundamental level in the political-economic context. As Benedict Anderson has shown, the transition from the written to the printed word enabled the commodification of the Christian bible (Anderson 1983). Once books could be mass produced, a nascent European merchant class seeking new markets for their wares translated bibles into vernacular languages. Such activity was a precondition for the Protestant Reformation and had a devastating effect on the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Civilization; but the precondition for such activity was an innovation in material technology: the Gutenberg printing press.

In terms of Couldry's pyramidal scheme, then, in this dissertation the technical features of media are placed in the foreground. However, in attempting to explain the political effects of variation in media technology, it is impossible to ignore, on the one hand, how such technologies are employed in local settings and, on the other, how these technologies enable or constrain processes of content production, distribution, and consumption. In short, I am concerned with how the technical properties of media structure the range of actions—production, distribution, and reception—available to social and political actors. Such action, of course, takes place in a particular context and is influenced, as much as by the technology itself, by the local social practices that have evolved over time and that co-evolve with the adoption of new media.

### *The Concept of Media*



John Durham Peters (2010) argues that media constitute a three-part system consisting of a message (sign-content), a means (some form of technology capable of transmitting the message), and agents (authors of and audiences to the message). Although it is not clear that this triad, taken together, is fundamentally different from communication itself, it is a useful analytical device for considering what media are, and what they do. Media are, at their essence, the second component of this triad: the means by which messages are transmitted between people at either a spatial or temporal distance.

Perhaps the simplest definition of media was given by Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer of medium theory, in his seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1994). Media are, as the book's subtitle suggests, "extensions of men." That is, media extend the physical and cognitive capacities of human beings in terms of power, speed, and reach (McLuhan 1994, p. 90). Thus, a fork is a medium because it extends one's hand, making it easier to eat; a shoe, a bicycle, a car are all media because they extend one's legs and feet, making it easier to travel. In this regard, media are for McLuhan practically indistinguishable from technology or human artefacts. However, McLuhan was primarily concerned with the effects of a transition from a society that engages predominantly with textual media, such as books and newspapers, to a society engaged predominantly with visual media, such as the television.

McLuhan's ultimate goal was not simply to define or to describe media, but rather to understand media's social effects. The Canadian scholar was concerned that scholarly attention to media had disproportionately focused on *what* people communicate through media, neglecting the fact that media also affect *how* we communicate. Media affect what kinds of messages can be sent (textual, auidial, visual) as well as who can communicate with whom, for how long, with

what level of ease, and under what conditions. Importantly, media affect how we receive and interpret messages, regardless of the specific content of a text.

What we are considering here...are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns [of media] as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs (McLuhan 1964, p. 8).

In short, McLuhan argued, "the medium *is* the message" (McLuhan 1964, p. 7, italics added). That is, the content of any message was of minor significance when compared to the ways that media shape human relations. Indeed, although media exteriorize our physical and cognitive capacities, by employing media we simultaneously “auto-amputate” those capacities (McLuhan 1994). Such an argument was perhaps made first, and most famously, by Plato in *Phaedrus*, when Socrates recounts a legend concerning the origins of writing. The Egyptian god Theuth has presented King Thamus with the gift of writing, claiming that it will be an invaluable aid to memory. However, King Thamus remains skeptical, arguing that although writing may aid recollection, it will actually impair memory.

[This] invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because [their] trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir, not of memory, but of reminding . . . (Plato, 1967).

For McLuhan, the simultaneous processes of exteriorization and auto-amputation of human capacities is not peculiar to any particular invention or phase of humanity but, rather, is constitutive of humanity itself. That is, "at the heart of McLuhan's conceptualization of media as

'extensions of man' [is the] fundamental correlation of the human and the technical" (Mitchell and Hanson 2010, p. xii). Bernard Stiegler (2010) is even more explicit on this point, arguing that what distinguishes humans as a species is "technics," the use of tools to create other tools. Stiegler suggests that the arc of human evolution parallels the technical exteriorization of human capacities, in particular, the exteriorization of memory. Thus, in the words of Friedrich Kittler, "media determine our situation" (Kittler 1999, p. xxxix).

For media theorists such as McLuhan and Stiegler, media are material artefacts that have social effects, the most significant effects deriving from the fact that media both amplify and limit our communicative capacities. In this dissertation, I limit my analysis to mass media, a delimited set of communicative media that nonetheless exhibit significant internal variation. According to John Burnham Peters, mass media increasingly extend our cognitive capacities across two dimensions: "range and duration," or space and time (Peters 2010).

[the] historical tendency of the past two centuries has been to push the speed of delivery to zero and size of audiences to infinity ... Modern mass media have not only extended and sped up communication; they have increased or reinforced its internal varieties. A mass audience of radio or television is a collective united in time but dispersed in space (Peters 2010, p. 272-3).

Mass media amplify the ability to communicate over greater stretches of space, in shorter amounts of time and, importantly, to greater numbers of people. In a sense, the historical trajectory of mass media—until the recent past—has been characterized by two inverse relationships. On the one hand, mass media have tended to extend communicative capacity at ever greater distances, over ever shorter periods of time. On the other hand, to the extent that

mass media have increased the number of recipients to whom messages may be delivered, they have also concentrated the capacity to send messages in the hands of fewer actors.

Typically mass media are the playthings of institutions. They are expensive to run, usually require distinct castes with specialized knowledge (scribes, programmers, “talent”) to operate them, and are of great strategic importance politically, economically, culturally and otherwise. Rarely in history have mass media operated apart from the central power sources of a social order, and they are typically under the management of the palace, the market, or the temple. Where mass media are, there is usually power (Peters 2010, p. 277).

Insofar as new media allow users to communicate with large numbers of people, at great distances, and nearly instantaneously, they are also mass media. Yet new media appear to buck at least one trend: new media have radically diffused rather than concentrated the capacity to communicate to mass audiences. When theorists characterize new media as revolutionary, they refer implicitly to this divergence. However, in order to better put current changes into context, it is useful to look at media transformations in historical context. I take up this task in the following section.

### *Media Transformations and the Organization of Social Power*

Whereas McLuhan was concerned with the “psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns” of media, this dissertation is concerned with media’s political effects. In particular, it is concerned with how transformations in media technology affect the relationships between social actors and the apex of political power in modern societies: the state. Empirical research on the impact of media on politics has focused, in large part, on the effects that media have on elections,

campaigns, and voting behavior or, otherwise, on the management of visibility and self-presentation of rulers (Thompson 2012, pp. 269, 271). Notable exceptions to this trend include several authors who might not have categorized themselves in terms of the pyramidal framework outlined above, but whose research, nonetheless, engages the intersections among transformations in media technology, social practice, and political economy.

In two separate works, *Empire and Communications* and *The Bias of Communication*, Harold Innis argued that political orders are conditioned by the media technologies available to them (Innis 1950; 1951). For Innis, “the use of a particular communication tool defined the quantity and quantity of knowledge shared [and] preserved in [a given] society” (Howard 2011, p. 8). Innis was particularly interested in the effect that transitions from heavy, durable media (e.g., clay and parchment) to lighter, but less durable media (e.g., papyrus and paper) had on the organization of power in society. The former required enormous amounts of economic, intellectual, and even physical resources—etching clay tablets or “pushing the quill across the vellum for six hours a day” took decent amounts of strength and stamina (Whimster 2007, p. 199). Furthermore, the product of such labor was a material artefact of significant size and weight. The *Codex Amiatinus* (AD 700), for example, required the skins of over 1,5000 calves, weighed over 70 lbs., and measured 10 by 14 by 20 inches (Whimster 2007, p. 199). In stark contrast, the Tyndale Bible (AD 1525) could fit into the palm of one’s hand.

Innis argued that media are “biased,” that they favor particular forms of power over others. “Time-binding” media lend themselves to control by social actors who wield religious/ideological power, and “space-binding” media favor control by actors with political or economic power. For example, manuscript bibles were time-binding media. On one hand, they bound, as it were, the present with the past and the future; on the other, they precluded the

extension of rule over great distances. The media of monastic scribes were not practicably mobile, but nor did they need to be. The church was the institutional embodiment of an omniscient and omnipresent God. It did not need to be in the presence of all those over whom it ruled because God was. Time-binding media, although constraining the mobility of rulers, nevertheless enabled decentralized and indirect forms of rule.

Print and paper, in contrast, constituted space-binding media—media that extended the ability to rule over larger areas while increasing the ability of rulers to exercise direct and centralized control over their territories. This was a function of the reduction in weight enabled by paper and the reduction in labor enabled by paper. The Gutenberg Bible, in stark contrast to the *Codex Amiatinus*, was a commodity intended explicitly for mass production and sale. Print media allowed rulers to document their territories through use of reports, thereby enabling more direct forms of rule over larger pieces of land. In short, Innis argued that particular kinds of power—particular kinds of political order—are enabled, if not engendered, by the material bias of media themselves.

The print revolution is perhaps the single most important media transformation in terms of its lasting effect on the organization of power in the modern world. Although print ultimately had the effect of democratizing literacy, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1980) has argued that its initial impact was felt most strongly among *already literate* segments of the European elite. The print revolution changed, not only the ways that elites communicated, but also the ways they collected, stored, and retrieved data. Print allowed the multiplication of texts and, thus, also comparison and cross-referencing. As “contradiction became more visible, divergent traditions [became] more difficult to reconcile ... it changed the relationship between men of learning as well as between systems of ideas” (Eisenstein 1980, p. 48). Above all, this innovation

engendered among the European intellectual elite the idea that the best way to preserve valuable information was to make it public.

When a heresy was condemned or a schismatic king excommunicated, such actions left a more indelible imprint than had been the case in earlier centuries. Similarly, as edicts became more visible, they also became more irrevocable. ... It was no longer possible to take for granted that one was following “immemorial tradition” when granting immunity or signing a decree. ... Struggles over the right to establish precedents became more intense as each precedent became more permanent and hence more difficult to break (Eisenstein 1980, p. 93).

For Eisenstein, the impact on the fixity of knowledge was, if not the most radical aspect of the print revolution, a precondition for the rest. What were once “localized transitory effects” became “widespread and permanent ones” (Eisenstein 1980, p. 172). Of course, changes in the organization of knowledge had powerful secondary effects on the organization of politics. On the one hand, print had a devastating effect on the unity of the Roman Catholic Church (Eisenstein 1980; Anderson 1983). As shown above, the combination of print technology, European linguistic diversity, and nascent capitalism had the effect of democratizing access to holy texts and displacing power from the Pope (Anderson 1983). Equally significantly, of course, the spread of vernacular literature fixed languages and created the conditions whereby communities of strangers united by print literature came to “imagine” themselves as part of the same community, further diluting the unifying power of the Catholic Church (Anderson 1983). Whereas, “the command of Latin had once defined participation in a wider culture for a small elite, the command of French now defined full participation in French culture” (Scott 1998, p. 73).

On the other hand, the ability to record, categorize, store, and retrieve data permitted secular rulers an unprecedented capacity to make “legible” societies that were once quite opaque (Scott 1998). Indeed, whereas print technology may have diverted power away from the Church, it may have helped to consolidate it in nascent territorial states. As Peter Burke has argued, the innovation of print media gave rise to what might be called “the paper state,” an early progenitor to the bureaucracy:

rulers themselves were turning into bureaucrats as well as employing bureaucrats. The classic case is that of Philip II of Spain, who was nicknamed by his subjects “the king of paper” (*el rey papelero*), because of the number of hours he spent at his desk and the number of documents generated by his attempts to learn about and control the lives of his subjects (Burke 2013, p. 119).

The advent of printing technology in Europe has been deemed revolutionary because it is implicated in the fundamental transformation of social relations that gave rise to early modern Europe. Of course, print technology was not alone in precipitating this shift, nor was the direction of change determined by the nature of the technology itself. Nonetheless, print enabled new types of social relationships, without which such organizational forms as bureaucracy and such identities as the nation would have been, to paraphrase Anderson, unimaginable. If such a revolution is afoot today, we cannot yet know, but it is hard to deny that new media appear ripe with revolutionary potential. Like print media before them, new media have enabled—indeed, have already engendered—new forms of social relationships. The nature of this transformation and the kinds of relationships precipitated by it has been depicted best by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* (2006). In the remainder of this section, I offer an extended discussion of Benkler’s theory of media, which serves as a major point of departure for my research.



In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Yochai Benkler argues that the content of media—information—is analogous to a commodity or a good in an economy. As with goods in a physical economy, the production, distribution, and consumption of information require various amounts of resources including, in particular, manufactured capital. The mass production of traditional information goods—media such as books, newspapers, and films—requires amounts of manufactured capital that could only be mobilized by large organizations, such as corporations or states. Such capital-intensive processes of content production and distribution result in economies of scale, engendering what Benkler terms industrial information economies—media industries within which the capacity to produce and distribute information goods is concentrated in the hands of relatively few industrial organizations that dominate the supply side of an information economy. On the other hand, scale economies allowed industrial media organizations to supply relatively inexpensive information goods to a relatively undifferentiated mass audience constituting a passive consumer base.

Benkler contrasted the organization of such industrial information economies with then emergent "networked information economies," brought about by the adoption of new media. In a networked information economy, the capital necessary to produce and distribute information goods capable of widespread consumption was no longer concentrated in the hands of industrial actors. Such capacity is as widely available as consumptive capacity, each furnished by access to a personal computer and a reliable connection to the Internet. In stark contrast to the centralizing tendencies of industrial information economies, networked information economies favored a diffusion of capacity. If this was true, Benkler argued, it could have radical implications for the nature of, not only economic, but also cultural production.

In the industrial information economies of mass societies, the need to produce information goods that serve the interests of ever greater proportions of society incentivizes the production of goods that appeal to the lowest common denominator. The result was the emergence of one-size-fits-most mass culture—the “role of the individuals and communities vis-à-vis cultural artifacts changed, from co-producers and replicators to passive consumers” (Benkler 2006, p. 296). Pop music, pulp fiction, blockbuster films, home encyclopedias, and national broadcast networks each represented solutions to a problem inherent to mass societies: on what basis can the best quality information goods be provided to the broadest segments of society? Embedded in this question is an assumption that it is not possible to produce or to distribute all information goods. Choices must be made; some products will achieve widespread consumption, while others will remain in relative obscurity. Inevitably, the solution to the problem of mass production involves concentrating the authority to make these choices in the hands of relatively few actors, a group of experts—editors, producers, managers, censors—vested with the authority to decide what gets produced, what achieves widespread distribution, and, just as importantly, what does not.

Expert decisions, however, are not always based on economic factors. Indeed, just as often, the choices made by experts invoke cultural, pedagogical, ideological, or purely political considerations. Which public broadcast program serves a truly edifying purpose, and which is merely entertainment? What is essential knowledge, worthy of inclusion in an encyclopedia and what is not? Does a film have “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” or does it appeal to “the prurient interest”? Couched in these terms, one can discern that the implications of industrial solutions to the problems of cultural production in mass societies are not simply cultural or economic—they are also inherently political.

In contrast to the industrial media model, in a networked information economy, the activities of information production and distribution are taken up by a decentralized base of actors. The users who produce and distribute content are not necessarily—and are predominantly not—experts, as such. Though it is true that individuals employed by industrial media organizations increasingly utilize Web 2.0 applications to promote information that has been produced in traditional media spheres, a large and, arguably, more valuable portion of Web 2.0 content is contributed by unpaid, non-professional individuals, some of whom are frequent contributors, and some of whom rarely contribute. Even if individual end users did not actively produce content online, they would still contribute to the dynamism of the networked information economy by exercising distributive capacity. Every time a user shares someone else's content to her social network, she acts as a distributor. Indeed, insofar as social media applications are embedded with features that allow users to "like," to "star," or to rate content, and thereby highlight or conceal content from other users, even the most passive users may contribute to the distribution of mass mediated content.

It is not simply that social media enable decentralized participation, but rather, in many ways, they demand it. Consider Wikipedia as an example. As the reader is likely aware, anyone with a computer and an unimpeded connection to the Internet can create or edit any Wikipedia entry. As of September 2015, 26,006,334 unique editors had contributed to Wikipedia—118,446 in the month of August alone (Wikipedia 2015). Rather than a centralized group of experts curating, editing, and censoring mass-mediated content, a decentralized mass of individuals takes on such responsibilities. The result is what is known as a power law distribution (Figure 1). On Wikipedia, there are, inevitably, a small number of users who make myriad content contributions and myriad users who make a small number of content contributions. The former constitutes the

head of the distribution (Figure 1, dark shaded area), and the latter constitute what has been termed “the long tail” (Figure 1, light shaded area; Anderson 2004; 2006). In terms of production on social media applications, the tail can be exceptionally long, such that its length dwarfs the height of the head.

**Figure 1.1. Power Law Distribution**

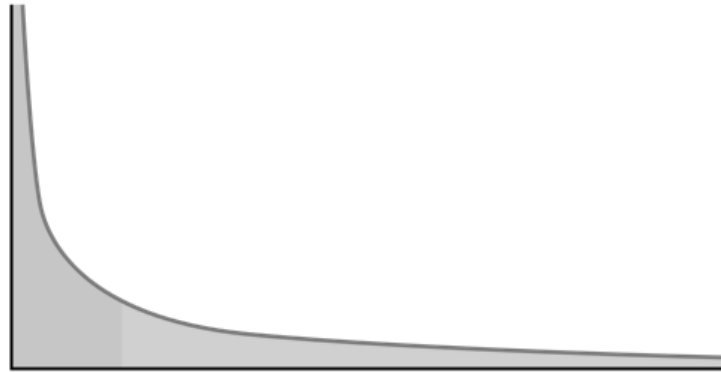


Image Source: Wikipedia.org

Under the conditions of an industrial information economy, the majority of would-be authors of mass-mediated content are effectively excluded from participation. In contrast, in a networked information economy, myriad niche producers constitute a “long tail” that exists alongside a “head” of more prolific contributors. The outcome of such radically decentralized participation is a novel form of cultural production, distribution, and consumption, one that demands decentralized participation. A networked information economy represents a radical diffusion, not simply of the power to produce and distribute information, but of the power to create meaning. And as access to personal computing devices and reliable Internet connections become more ubiquitous, Web 2.0 applications, such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter, and their local alternatives worldwide, have become new sites of political struggle.

Benkler’s economic theory of media is essential because it forces us to think about how scarcity and the demands of modern mass societies structure access to resources such as media. However, such a theory remains only a starting point. Whereas Benkler was ultimately concerned with the effect of media transformations on the dynamics of cultural production, I will

argue that these shifts also impinge on relationships of power. Furthermore, variation in the concentration of media capacities depends also on a broader suite of institutions, practices, and political goals. Their interconnections constitute what I refer to as an information ecology. In an information ecology, economic constraints are not the only, nor even the primary, factors affecting the distribution of media capacity in society—social practices, administrative constraints, and political exigencies can be equally, if not more influential in this regard.

### *Media as a Means of Social Power*

The works detailed above illustrate important features of the relationship between media and social power. First, media are material artefacts. Media are not simply technologies of communication, nor are texts simply content. They are also, respectively, productive resources and commodities. They may be manufactured, destroyed, bought, sold, used, monopolized, or left idle. Therefore, how media are employed depends, not simply on political or ideological, but also on economic considerations.

Second, the social practices that media enable, the political and economic interactions that they permit, are varied but not unlimited. Rather they are biased toward particular social and organizational forms. These forms reflect the limits—in weight, space, time, scarcity, or cost—imposed by their materiality. These social forms are not merely limits, but also potentialities. To the extent that media vary in terms of their technical or material qualities, therefore, they simultaneously impose new limits on and create new potential for social action.

Third, the impact of media transformations is not necessarily felt at all levels of society in the same ways or at the same time. Although the print revolution ultimately had democratizing,

bureaucratizing, and nationalizing effects, it first affected the organization of knowledge among a highly-circumscribed segment of the European elite. Such variation reflects, again, the materiality of media, the scarcity that attends to the production of material artefacts, the social forms engendered by media's materiality and scarcity, and the power that accrues from access to such resources.

Fourth, the effects of media transformations are inevitably, if not inherently, political. As Peter Burke has argued, mass media have rarely “operated apart from the central power resources of a social order” (Burke 2012). Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the next section, mass media are central power resources of social order. Mass media are constitutive of modern societies, and modern societies are organized into distinct forms of polities, i.e., as states. However, although mass media are essential resources of state power, they are not the fundamental resources of state power. As Max Weber has argued, the constitutive source of state power is the means of violence. Media cannot and do not constitute state power, yet they are indispensable tools that states must employ in order to reproduce state power. In the next chapter, I argue that this fact is the source of a particular form of dilemma for all states.

## Chapter Outline

In chapter two, I delve more deeply into a discussion of the dilemma of state power, how media are implicated in this dilemma, and the effect that this relationship has on state efforts to manage political speech in an era of media transformation. I do so by parsing Weber's concepts of power and domination, and analyzing how they feature into his state concept. Rather than define the state in terms of its ends or its motivating interests, Weber defined the state in terms of its

relationship to particular sources of social power: the means of physical violence. As I will argue, Weber's emphasis on the means of physical violence is significant because violence is but one resource of social power—the basis of political power. However, whereas the means of physical violence are constitutive of state power, in order to reproduce themselves states must inevitably also rely on other, secondary resources: ideological and economic sources of social power. Not only will it never actually monopolize these resources, but in order to legitimate its rule, the state may have to actively provision societies with the capacity to wield such secondary social power resources, resources that can be and often are used in ways that threaten state interests.

I argue that the means of communication—media—are not simply secondary social power resources; they also constitute what I refer to as versatile means of social power: social power resources that do not have singular political, economic, or ideological applications. This versatility, I will argue, exacerbates the dilemma of state power. Because media do not have explicitly political, economic, or ideological power applications, it is not only more difficult to justify their expropriation from the private sphere, but states may also actually have interests in facilitating their private, widespread, and autonomous use. Whether and how states will respond to unique dilemmas of state power posed by media will be determined by a suite of institutional constraints that I refer to as the information ecology. I take each of these issues up, in turn, in the next chapter.

In chapters three through seven, I present five case studies of Chinese information ecologies. Each case study will reveal how state responses to the dilemma of state power vary according to the constraints imposed by distinct information ecologies. Chapters three through six each focus on what may be called the traditional information ecologies. Chapters three, four,



and five are case studies of the Chinese film ecology, the Chinese book publications ecology, and the Chinese television ecology, respectively. Chapter six is a case comparison of the television and print news ecologies. In chapter seven, I offer a case study of the new media ecology in China with a particular focus on social media. Finally, in chapter eight, I conclude by summarizing my research and contributions as well as suggesting some paths for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Nature of the State

In this dissertation, I seek to understand how innovations in media technology affect the ways that states attempt to exercise control over political speech. Built into my research question, then, is an assumption about the nature of states: that states are themselves agents in the political process. States are corporate and purposeful actors that have interests and goals of their own, and may take action in pursuit of these. In short, I adopt an explicitly neo-Weberian approach to the state.

Neo-Weberian approaches to the state emerged in response to society-centered biases within both behavioralism-pluralism and neo-Marxism, each of which viewed the state as epiphenomenal to the more fundamental processes of interest group competition and class struggle, respectively (Truman 1951; Easton 1953; Dahl 1961; Lowi 1969; Miliband 1969; Althusser 1971; Poulantzas 1978). In contrast to society-centered conceptions of state form and function, neo-Weberian approaches share the perspective that the state is a potentially autonomous political actor capable of an independent effect on political processes. The most widely cited text in this area is an edited volume, titled *Bringing the State Back In* (Evans, et al. 1985). In the volume's introduction, Theda Skocpol argues that the state is not merely an arena within which (or an instrument for which) social actors compete, much less is it an amorphous

mélange of institutions and practices.<sup>1</sup> The state is a corporate and purposeful organization with its own interests, an autonomous actor in its own right. According to Skocpol,

states conceived as organizations claiming control over territories and people may formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society (1985, p. 9).

From the neo-Weberian perspective, then, states have, among other motivations, *state interests*. In areas such as foreign policy and domestic welfare, class or group interests must often take a backseat to the more fundamental “national interest” (Krasner 1978). Indeed, in states such as China, where a single party dominates the political arena, these state interests may include the management of oppositional political speech. Thus, in order to protect the Party’s position at the apex of political power in China, the Chinese state can and does act purposefully and instrumentally in its attempts to manage political speech.

Neo-Weberian approaches are often characterized as “state-centered” because authors associated with this literature tend to be preoccupied with the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis

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<sup>1</sup> Neither Skocpol nor any of the contributing authors to this volume engage the poststructuralist critique of the state concept, but one can deduce that they would be equally critical of such approaches. Post-structuralism is a label attributed to a range of analytical approaches to social phenomena united by a critique of the ways in which language and discourse—the practices by which meaning is assigned to the social world—shape or construct reality. Post-structural critiques of the state and of state theory, then, interrogate how power is embedded in and reproduced by the promotion of certain concepts of the state and the exclusion or marginalization of others. No other thinker has been more influential in this regard than Michel Foucault, who traced the origins of particular “disciplinary” practices associated with the rise of the liberal state to question our assumptions about the locus of power in modern society (Foucault 1977). Foucault argued that modern political theory’s obsession with the state had blinded it to the nature of social power, which, in liberal states, was not primarily located at the apex of the state apparatus but was diffused throughout society in various institutions and practices of control (Foucault 1980). Insofar as Foucault sought to “decenter” the state, to shift the analysis of power away from the state and toward the varied institutions, practices, and discourses that work to embed control in self-regulating individuals, his approach, and that of his heirs, runs directly counter to that proposed by Evans, et al. (Foucault 1991; see also: Ashley 1988, Bourdieu 1994; Agamben 1998; Rose 1999; Dean 2010).

But to say that such techniques of power obtain within liberal societies, is not to say that purposeful, instrumental techniques of state power do not. Furthermore, it is to say very little about the nature of power in authoritarian or illiberal polities, where recourse to physical coercion and explicit censorship may be far more salient. Although it is important to recognize the decentered nature of specific forms of power, it is just as important to recognize that these are not the only techniques of power exerted over society. In other words, the argument that purely sovereign accounts of power are biased is sound, but one should be wary of an equal and opposite bias.

other social actors (Nettl 1968; Krasner 1978; Skocpol 1979; Nordlinger 1981; Krasner 1984; Mann 1984). However, “state-centeredness” is an analytical choice, one that becomes possible only when one conceives of the state as a corporate actor; and state autonomy is an implication of statehood that follows from a particular ontological perspective, namely, that the nature of the state derives from its relationship to a particular set of capacities. In Skocpol’s words, “administrative and coercive organizations are the basis of state power as such” and it precisely because of this fact that states can act with autonomy from other social groups (1979, p. 29, italics added). Skocpol echoes Max Weber who argued that the defining feature of the state is its monopoly over the legitimate means of physical violence (1978). Since Weber’s concept of the state was articulated explicitly in terms of the state’s unique relationship to a particular set of means, a neo-Weberian approach to the state is, above all, a means-based ontology of the state. That is, the state is conceived in terms of its relationship with particular kinds of power resources—the means of physical violence. As I will argue in the next section, this relationship between the state and violent power resources is at the heart of a dilemma inherent to state power in modern societies.

### **The Dilemma of State Power**

Max Weber and his heirs identify three fundamental sources of social power, each deriving from the control of specific kinds of resources. To wit, the qualities of social power derive from control of wealth, force, or knowledge: “plough, sword, and book” (Bobbio 1989; Gellner 1989). According to this scheme, each source of social power has a material basis: economic power derives from control over the means of material production; political power derives from control

over the means of physical coercion; and ideological or normative power derives from control over the means of interpretation or cognition (Bobbio 1989; Poggi 1990; 2001). Michael Mann (1986) has argued that this trinity ought to be expanded to include four distinct types of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political. In this scheme, recourse to violence is categorized as military power and political power is reassigned to the “centralized, territorial regulation of social life,” a form of administrative power that exists only within states. However, if it is true that political power, as conceived by Mann, exists only within states, then such power is necessarily derivative of another form (or other forms) of power which is itself (or are themselves) constitutive of the state.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, for Weber political power—recourse to violence—is the primary, if not sole, constitutive element of statehood. And the nature of the state is derived from the unique nature of its relationship to these particular means. In what follows, I will elaborate exactly how this relationship is construed by Weber and then draw out its implications for the nature of state-society relationships.

Because the ends of political associations are innumerable, and because there is no particular end unique to political associations, Weber argued that “the state must be defined in terms of the specific *means* peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 78; italics in original). Political power rests, ultimately, on the capacity to dispense physical violence and, thus, all political organizations are fundamentally violent. However, not all political organizations are states. States are distinguished from other political associations by virtue of the fact that they monopolize the authority or right to dispense physical violence. In *Economy and Society*, Weber argues that the state is

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended critique of Mann’s formulation, and a defense of the “trinitarian” approach, see Gianfranco Poggi (2006).

a compulsory organization with a territorial basis. Furthermore, today the use of force is regarded as legitimate only so far as it is either permitted by the state or prescribed by it. ... The claim of the modern state to monopolize the use of force is as essential to it as its character of compulsory jurisdiction and of continuous operation” (Weber 1978, p. 56).

In Weber’s conception, then, the monopoly over the authority to employ violence and the feature of territoriality are inextricably linked: short of a world state, any monopoly of violence presupposes a territorial limit, a boundary within which there is only one “ruling organization” (*herrschaftsverband*), and outside of which there are others. However, when conceptualizing the state in Weberian terms, there is a tendency for scholars to fixate on the state's means, physical violence, to the neglect of the unique nature of those means, namely, that they are legitimate precisely because they emanate from a territorially bounded state. That is, in contrast to other historical forms of political order, in modern societies only the state has the right to use (or to threaten) violence without prior authorization from another, higher authority.

In the past, the most varied institutions...have known the use of physical force as quite normal [but today] the right to use physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the state permits it. The state is considered the sole source of the “right” to use violence (Weber 1946, p. 78).

Thus, the nature of the state’s monopoly is over the legitimate means of coercion, and not over physical violence as such. Indeed, Weber’s concept of the state leaves open the possibility that other organizations or individuals will wield coercive means.

A second assumption of Weber’s state concept is that although states must necessarily have recourse to physical violence, they cannot and do not rely on such means exclusively. According to Weber

it goes without saying that the use of physical force (*Gewaltsamkeit*) is neither the sole, nor even the most usual, method of administration of political organizations. On the contrary, their heads have employed all conceivable means to bring about their ends (Weber 1978, p. 55).

In pursuit of a state's many and varied ends, then, the means of coercion are necessary, but insufficient. States must also, therefore, appropriate or manage other social power resources from the private sphere. But this task is complicated by the fact that both states and societies benefit from the private, diffuse, and independent use of non-violent social power resources. Indeed, in most contemporary states, there are a great many economic and ideological power resources that may be exercised privately without the express authorization of the state. Put another way, whereas all states must necessarily monopolize the legitimate use of political power resources, only some states have attempted to monopolize the legitimate use of economic power resources (socialist states), and very few states have attempted to monopolize ideological power resources (totalitarian states and theocratic states). Therefore, in terms of their role in constituting the state, there is a hierarchy of social power resources, wherein political resources are primary and non-coercive resources are secondary.

But although the means available to states may reflect particular sources of social power, they may also be rather versatile in terms of their application. That is, certain tools and technologies may have equally useful political, economic, or ideological applications—if not all three, then some combination of the two. A blade, for example, may be as useful in the kitchen as it is in combat. The means of mobility—vehicles for transport as well as technologies for documenting individual identity—are equally well-suited to economic purposes (mobilizing goods and labor, collecting taxes) as to political purposes (mobilizing or conscripting soldiers;

transporting prisoners; registering voters). And from newspaper to the radio to the Internet, media have been applied for the purposes of mobilizing armies on the battlefield, coordinating goods in the economy, and propagating ideas about meaning and human values. Media—the means of communication—are, therefore, archetypically versatile means of social power.

Such versatility presents a dilemma to modern states. In modern societies, the legitimacy of the state is reinforced by its ability to provide services to society that it alone is capable of supplying precisely because it has monopolized the authority to dispense violence. Thus, in the process of expropriating the legitimate means of coercion from the private sphere,

the institutional basis for the performance of political or administrative tasks (including judicial, military, fiscal and police tasks) ceases to be the *right* to perform them that was previously vested in some individual or bodies. It becomes the *duty* to perform them, attached to the holding of diverse offices by diverse people, all of whom, however, are supposed in principle to serve not their own interest, but the public interest (Poggi 2006, p. 114, italics in original).

In the evolution of modern statehood, then, the constitutive function of the exclusive right to deploy violence first authorizes states to perform political duties, then compels them to.

In contrast, it is increasingly rare for states to monopolize the legitimate use of secondary social power resources, such as means of production or means of interpretation. Instead, various states may appropriate the legitimate use of particular secondary power resources on limited or ad hoc bases. States may monopolize the authority to print money or to print newspapers, but they tend not to monopolize economic or ideological power resources as such. Thus, states tend to appropriate authority over the application of social power resources as opposed to the technical means of social power themselves.



Such expropriation is ordinarily justified in terms of the national or “public interest,” i.e., the fulfilment of the “duties” of statehood. But what constitutes “the national interest” is subject to very broad interpretation. At a minimum, states must secure citizens against external or internal political threats. They are typically also responsible for defending societies against economic threats construed variously as inflation, unemployment, monopoly, or the private ownership of productive means, themselves. States may even be called upon (or may take it upon themselves) to protect societies against threats of an ideological nature: hate speech, libel, obscenity, heresy, or simply the free speech of political opposition. In pursuit of these ends, states may seek to appropriate or otherwise to manage the private use of secondary and versatile means of social power, such as various forms of media. The obverse of this phenomenon is the fact that the development of the modern state has been accompanied by a progressive expansion of public services. That is, the duties of modern states include provisioning a range of resources and services designed to empower citizens to participate in the economy, in politics, or in the production of ideas and culture. In order to fulfill these obligations, states may need to provide societies with social power resources that can be used either to challenge those who hold state power or in ways that threaten perceived state or national interests. Short of this, states may be obligated to refrain from the independent development of such resources.

By provisioning social power resources to actors in society, or by refraining from interfering with the independent development of such resources, states may empower challengers to state power or, otherwise, empower actors with the potential to threaten state interests. But states are also served by the private, diffuse, and autonomous use of such resources. This is the crux of what I refer to as the dilemma of state power: some resources of social power have applications that can be both boons and threats to the state. Media, I argue, are just such versatile

and ambiguous social power resources. They are versatile, in the sense that they do not have strictly political, economic, or ideological applications, and they are ambiguous, in the sense that they may be both boons and threats to state interests. As I will argue below, how states manage such dilemmas reflect the constraints imposed on them by what I call the information ecology: the social and political context that shape how media are used in practice.

In the following section, I outline a theory of state control responses to the dilemma of state power. Embedded in this theory are several assumptions that reflect the foregoing analysis of state power. First, the argument that I am making is not simply one about states and media, but rather one about the relationship between states and the means of social power. By defining the state in Weberian terms, I make a direct claim about the state's relationship to the means of physical violence as well as an indirect claim about the state's relationship to secondary and versatile means of social power. To wit, the inability of states to monopolize authority over secondary and versatile means of social power, and the need for states to empower citizens with some of those very means pose a dilemma that can take a variety of forms. Therefore, the dilemma of state power is not merely a "dictator's" dilemma—it is neither restricted to authoritarian regimes, nor to the realm of media. Democratic regimes will also inevitably seek to exercise control over social behavior and must, under varying circumstances and in varying ways, appropriate, centralize, or preempt the use of particular social power resources. Furthermore, although the substantive focus of this dissertation is media, the dilemma of state power implicates other secondary and versatile means of social power as well.

Second, social power has a material basis. That is, whereas social power may be an abstract concept, the means of social power are not. The means of social power are embodied in specific tools and technologies—as Hannah Arendt once argued, "violence ... always needs

implements” (Arendt 1970, p. 4). So too, I argue, do economic production and ideological interpretation/persuasion. The means of violence/coercion (bombs, tanks, guns, and prison cells), the means of economic production (factories, cars, offices, computers), and the means of interpretation and mass persuasion (books, newspapers, films, computers, and smartphones) are material artefacts. In the service of power, they can be manufactured, possessed, accessed, and employed; alternatively, they may be destroyed, monopolized, rendered inaccessible, or left idle. The materiality of the means of social power, therefore, suggests that scarcity and abundance, whether arising organically or imposed artificially, can affect the distribution of power within society simply by affecting who (and how many) have access to such means. This is an issue that will be revisited frequently over the course of this dissertation.

Third, a corollary of the second assumption, is a distinction between the means of social power and the capacities that such means enable. As an example, a firearm gives one the capacity to pierce another's flesh and internal organs with a bullet, thus causing him grave injury, if not death. That is, a firearm has an application—perhaps only one—and it is recourse to this application that gives one power. Throughout this dissertation, I will refer often to social capacities, which refer to particular applications of the means or resources of social power, capabilities that are enabled by such means. Insofar as media may be considered means of social power, they enable or constrain various capacities—the capacity to author, publish, distribute, consume, or store information, for example. As I will argue below, although access to means of social power enable various social capacities, they do not necessarily entail them. For example, it should not be assumed that because pens and paper are widely available throughout a society that the ability to author and publish newspaper articles is also widespread. Such capacity may also depend on individual aptitude, access to institutional resources, such as archival databases or

press passes, the ability to reach broad audiences, and rights to free speech, to name just a few. Means or resources of social power are, therefore, necessary but insufficient conditions for the exercise of social capacity. However, since the exercise of social capacity implies access to means of social power, it will often be sufficient (and less redundant) to refer only to, for example, the diffusion of social capacity, as opposed to the diffusion of the means of social power as such. Throughout this dissertation, I will adopt this shorthand unless distinguishing between the means and the applications that they enable would help clarify an argument.

Fourth, despite social power's material basis, not all means of social power can be categorized neatly in terms of economic, ideological, or political capacity. The implications of this versatility are twofold. On the one hand, the versatility of social power resources suggests that the uses to which particular tools and technologies may be put—the social capacities that they enable—do not inhere in the artefacts themselves. Thus, whereas the materiality of media limits the outer bounds of media use, media are also social artefacts: the social capacities that they enable necessarily reflect the social milieu in which they are employed. In other words, social capacity is context specific, either enabled or constrained by various media technologies employed within specific contexts. On the other hand, it may be the case—indeed, it often is—that states will refrain from expropriating the means of social power as such, but rather will appropriate the authority to employ particular social capacities. For example, because many potentially violent resources also have economic applications, a state is unlikely to monopolize the technical means to employ physical violence. Instead, states often monopolize the authority to employ these means for violent purposes, even though the technical means may be available throughout society.

## Social Capacity and Control

The dilemma of state power is particularly salient in relation to media because media are inherently versatile and ambiguous means of social power. On the one hand, media are tools and technologies that are easily repurposed in service of multiple power applications. On the other hand, the social use of media may either be a boon or a threat to the state. The multiple uses to which media may be put make it unlikely, if not impossible, for political leaders to justify their wholesale expropriation from the private sphere. Moreover, insofar as the private, autonomous, or widespread use of various forms of media are boons to economic and cultural production, political leaders may seek to encourage rather than discourage their use. States are, therefore, faced with hard choices about how to manage these resources of social power.

But although state responses to the dilemma of state power may vary widely, there is not an infinite range of responses. Instead, there are limited qualities of state response to a dilemma that can manifest itself in myriad ways. That is, when states are confronted with dilemmas of state power, variation in their responses is limited to three fundamental dimensions of state control. First, state control can be either direct or indirect, employed by the state itself or mediated by private sphere actors. Second, state control can be either centralized or decentralized, employed by the state center or mediated by subnational state actors. Third, state control can be either preemptive or retroactive, employed by the state prior to the exercise of social capacity or after social capacity has been exercised. Moreover, each dimension of state control reflects, but is not determined by, the organization of social capacity in society. Thus, the relationships between the organization of social capacity in society and the nature of state control are expressed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. I take these up in turn below.

*The First Dimension of Capacity and Control: Authority*

Whether control is direct or indirect depends on whether the authority to employ social capacity has been (or can be) appropriated from the private sphere. Do states monopolize the authority to employ particular applications of social power resources, such as the capacity to publish news, or do citizens enjoy private rights to such capacities? If such authority can be appropriated from the private sphere, states may exercise direct control over social capacity; that is, the state itself may decide when and how social capacity is employed. If such capacity cannot be appropriated from the private sphere—if citizens enjoy private rights to employ capacity—then to the extent that states desire to control the use of such capacities, control must be mediated by private sphere actors.

As I have argued above, modern states are unlikely to attempt to monopolize authority over secondary means of social power without qualifications. Instead, they are likely to appropriate secondary social capacities on limited or *ad hoc* bases. Thus, whereas states may not appropriate the means to publish news, such as printing technologies, they may appropriate the authority to publish news, requiring that all news publishing outfits are state-sponsored. But states may be unable (or unwilling) to appropriate such capacity, and yet they may still manage its use by regulating or licensing the activities of private sphere actors. Alternatively, states may refrain both from expropriating social capacity and refrain from regulating its use. Allowing social capacity to be managed by market mechanisms is neither direct control nor indirect control, but *laissez-faire* (non-control).

Whether direct control is possible depends, in legal terms, on the nature of rights to or authority over social capacity and, in practical terms, on whether means of social power are

subject to public or private ownership. There is, therefore, both a *de jure* and a *de facto* aspect of the first dimension of control. In terms of the former, the state may monopolize the authority to employ specific social capacities or citizens may enjoy guaranteed rights to employ social capacity. In terms of the latter, particular means of social power may simply be held by the state exclusively, regardless of an explicit legal justification, or may be held privately by citizens, regardless of a right to employ the means in a particular way. Whether state authority is *de jure* or *de facto*, I refer to it as a case of state expropriation of social capacity, a necessary condition for direct state control. And whether or not private citizens have explicit rights to exercise social capacity, I refer to their possession of means of social power and the consequent ability to employ those means in service of particular ends as privately held capacity, a sufficient condition for indirect state control.

#### *The Second Dimension of Capacity and Control: Access*

Whether control is centralized or decentralized depends on the nature of access to social capacity, i.e., whether social capacity is concentrated in the hands of relatively few actors or diffused widely to relatively many actors. Concentrated social capacity refers to capacity that is held by (or available to) relatively few actors, whereas diffuse social capacity refers to capacity that is widely held or accessible throughout society.

For many reasons, including the cost of technology or the skills required to employ technology, social capacity may be predisposed to concentration or diffusion. To the extent that it is disposed to concentration, social capacity is organized in such a way that lends itself to centralized administration; and to the extent that it is disposed to diffusion, it militates against

centralized administration. This is because when there are more actors with access to social capacity, managing their activity requires more administrators. For example, in any given year, there will be many more books published than films produced in China, reflecting, among other constraints, the costs associated with producing a film. Because there are many more books published, there are also many more book editors than there are film producers or film censors. This is an issue of administrative efficiency that is independent of whether control is exercised by the state or by some private sphere actor (authority).

However, from the state center's perspective, then, concentrated resources are more manageable because they lend themselves to centralized control. In James Scott's terms, diffusely held resources are relatively "illegible" to the state center and the center may take action to render otherwise diffuse resources more concentrated, allowing them to be controlled centrally either by the state (directly) or via private sphere actors (indirectly). Thus, concentrated social capacity is a necessary condition for centralized administration (control) and diffuse social capacity is a sufficient condition to determine that efforts at control must be decentralized.

### *The Third Dimension of Capacity and Control: Autonomy*

Finally, whether control is preemptive or retroactive depends on whether capacity can be employed by social actors independently or whether its exercise depends on coordination with other actors. Dependent social capacity is conceived as a necessary condition for preemptive control, whereas as independent social capacity is sufficient to determine that control must be retroactive.



Dependent (or coordinated) social capacity refers to capacity that cannot reasonably be exercised without assistance or cooperation from other actors. Dependent social capacity is necessary for preemptive forms of control because, to the extent that actors depend on others to employ social capacity, there are multiple ( $n > 1$ ) veto points over which control may be exercised. At each veto point an intervention can be made by the state or by any other actor seeking to exercise control over the exercise of social capacity.

In contrast, independent (or autonomous) social capacity refers to capacities that can reasonably be exercised without assistance or cooperation from other actors. Independent social capacity is resistant to preemptive forms of control (such as censorship) because, to the extent that they are independent, individual actors may rely on their own motivation and skill to exercise social capacity. There are, therefore, fewer (or no) veto points at which interventions can be made by the state or by other actors seeking to exercise control over the use of social power resources. Thus, insofar as social capacity may be exercised independently/autonomously, control must be retroactive.

In short, whereas dependent (coordinated) social capacity is a necessary condition for preemptive forms of control, independent (autonomous) social capacity is a sufficient condition for retroactive forms of control.

In sum, the qualities of state control depend on the qualities of social capacity: the authority over social capacity (private/appropriated), access to social capacity (concentrated/diffuse), and the autonomy with which social capacity may be employed (dependent/independent). Each dimension operates independently of each other, such that, for example, whether social capacity is appropriated or privatized tells us little about whether it is disposed to concentration or

diffusion. State control may, therefore, be direct and centralized, direct and decentralized, indirect and centralized, or indirect and decentralized depending on the qualities of social capacity in society. Thus, each of the three dimensions of control can concatenate in different ways with respect to different applications of social power. Finally, these relationships are conceived in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, such that the nature of social capacity may allow or preclude certain qualities of control, but does not entail them. That is, whether or not states will be motivated to exercise control over various social capacities as well as the lengths they will be willing to go in order to do so will depend a great deal on the political demands and institutional constraints of particular regimes, a point to which I will turn below. First, however, it is necessary to describe the features of media that shape the organization of social capacity in society: the information ecology.

### **The Information Ecology**

In this dissertation, I conceive of media as various information ecologies, an adaptation of Benkler's concept of information economy. According to Benkler, what distinguishes the networked information economy from the traditional or industrial information economies is that, in the former, productive capital, represented by a personal computer or a smartphone, is radically diffused throughout society. I depart from Benkler in several important respects that guide the following analysis.

First, as I showed in chapter one, the "media as practice" approach to media studies suggests that one cannot understand media outside of their socio-practical contexts (Couldry

2012). That is, media are means that may be—and often are—employed in different ways under different circumstances. Thus, for example, the concentration or diffusion of access to social capacity is not merely related to access to capital, but is also, in important ways, affected by social barriers, such as intellectual capacity, time, and norms of use: the difficulty or the labor required to write a book will likely prevent more people from writing one than will lack of access to a word processor.

Second, whereas Benkler's stress was on the diffusion of access to productive means, I argue that it is also important to consider how socio-practical constraints influence the autonomy with which capacities may be employed and even the rights with which citizens may employ. In terms of the former, innovations in media technology may reduce an individual's dependence on the coordinated action of other actors, allowing him to employ such capacity with relative independence. In terms of the latter, although citizens may enjoy the legal right to employ particular capacities, dense concentrations of capacity or highly dependent forms of capacity may have the practical effect of prohibiting private use for most citizens. Thus, to the extent that new technologies diffuse capacities, they may also render them more privatized. Taken together, then, along each dimension of capacity—authority, access, and autonomy—the technical features of media technologies shape the nature and organization of social capacity within society. Indeed, as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, new media exacerbate the dilemma of state power precisely because along each dimension of capacity/control—authority, access, and autonomy—new media shift the relationship between social actors and the means of social power away from the conditions most conducive to state intervention. The state's most comprehensive interventions into society are direct, centralized, and preemptive, exercised over social capacities that are appropriated, concentrated, and dependent. But along each of these

dimensions, new media engender conditions in which critical social capacities—to author, publish, distribute, or consume content—are held privately, more diffusely, and may be employed more autonomously.

All of the above, however, suggests a somewhat deterministic relationship between how social capacity is organized in society and how states are constrained in their efforts to control such capacity. But as I will show throughout this dissertation, access to social capacity and the autonomy with which social capacity may be employed are heavily influenced by actions taken by the state. By investing in infrastructure, by centralizing or decentralizing the management of state-owned properties, by regulating the import of foreign produced media, or by imposing licensing requirements for the exercise of specific media capacities, the state itself affects the organization of social capacity within society. Such state interventions may be taken for reasons of administrative expedience or in order to consolidate political control. Moreover, in modern societies, it is the state alone that has the ability to declare, if not to determine, which social actors have the legitimate authority to own particular means of social power or to employ particular social capacities. Thus, as I will show, the state in China may appropriate particular technologies, such as national-level network exchange routers; particular organizations, such as TV stations; and even particular social capacities, such as the authority to publish news content. In any system of communication, therefore, several programs, policies, and practices that are explicitly state effects, implemented for either administrative or political reasons, will affect who use media and how.

The information ecology, thus, comprises two overlapping contexts: on the one hand, a social context reflects the economic and socio-practical constraints that shape who has access to media and how media are used in practice; on the other hand, a political context reflects the goals

and capacities of the state. The information ecology shapes, not only access to media capacity, but also the autonomy with which media may be employed. Moreover, it reflects the fact that media are embedded in a political context of individual rights and state authority that, not only constrains, but also responds to emergent media practices. These three dimensions of social capacity—access, authority, and autonomy—describe specific qualities of media use. Media can be used by many or few actors (access); media can be used independently or may require coordination with other actors (autonomy); and media use may either be a (de facto or de jure) right enjoyed by private citizens or the exclusive province of the state (authority).

Variation along each of these dimensions is shaped by the social and political contexts that constitute the information ecology. However, not every dimension is affected equally by elements of the information ecology. Thus, whereas the interests to regulate, subsidize, censor, or appropriate various media capacities will vary by state, the capital costs of media technology are likely relatively consistent from country to country. In socio-practical terms, literacy rates have a significant effect on access to printed media, but not on access to visual media. And even though norms of media use may vary by culture, there are nonetheless features of media technology that structure how they may be used in practice—books, for example, do not lend themselves to group consumption, but films do. In short, the constraints imposed by the cost of technology or the social practices associated with the use of a given technology have a prominent effect on access and autonomy dimensions of media use independent of state intervention.

On the other hand, the authority dimension is not only an explicitly political aspect of media use, but unlike access and autonomy, it is also a primarily political aspect of use. That is, the very notion that individual citizens should enjoy private rights to employ media or, conversely, that such authority should be held by the state exclusively, is a predominantly

political effect. Of course, In practice, the costs or social norms associated with the use of particular technologies may make guarantees or restrictions on such rights relatively difficult to enforce. It is much easier, for example, to appropriate the right to publish newspapers than the right to author articles simply because most people cannot afford to own a printing press anyway. Such a constraint, however, emerges first and foremost from the political sphere.

The three dimensions of social capacity, in turn, shape the opportunities available to states seeking to exercise control over the use of media. But rather than conceiving the relationship between the quality of social capacity and the quality of state control in linear terms, I argue that these relationships must be conceived in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In each of the relationships above, variation in the quality of one dimension of social capacity either enables or precludes a quality of state control. Thus, for example, concentrated access to some media capacity does not entail centralized control by the state; rather, it enables it: it is a necessary condition for such control. In contrast, the diffusion of access to such capacity does not entail decentralized control, rather it precludes centralized control: it is sufficient to know that capacity is diffuse to also know that control must be decentralized (if control is desired. It is, of course, also possible that control is not a state imperative of first priority, if at all.) In short, as Table 1 illustrates, access to media capacity may either be concentrated or diffuse, enabling or precluding centralized control; media capacity may be employed relatively autonomously, precluding or enabling preemptive control; and that the authority or right to employ social capacity may be guaranteed to private citizens or may be appropriated by the state, precluding or enabling direct control by the state.

**Table 2.1. Three Dimensions of Capacity and Control**

<i>Ecological Context</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Social Capacity</i>	<i>Condition</i>	<i>State Control</i>
<i>Social</i>	Access	Concentrated	N→	Centralized
		Diffuse	S→	Decentralized
<i>Political</i>	Autonomy	Dependent	N→	Preemptive
		Independent	S→	Retroactive
	Authority	Appropriated	N→	Direct Control
		Privatized	S→	Indirect Control

The theory of media proposed here is, therefore, not a deterministic theory. It cannot tell us when and how a regime will seek to exercise control over the social use of media. Rather, it tells us the qualities that such control can exhibit given certain social and political conditions. But it also recognizes that states do not simply navigate these conditions—they react to them and, in so doing, shape them. Indeed, much of the state’s strategy of control can be conceived in terms of how it tries to alter the conditions of the information ecology to make one or another quality of control more manageable. Thus, chief among their strategies to manage the use of media, states seek to alter the nature of access, autonomy, and authority. By imposing regulations, licensing requirements, or laws criminalizing various kinds of media use states may seek to concentrate capacity, make it more dependent, or appropriate it from the private sphere and, thereby, render it more amenable to centralized, preemptive, or direct forms of control.

In summary, the multiple applications to which certain versatile resources of social power may be put make it difficult for states to justify their wholesale expropriation from the private sphere. Indeed, some of the uses to which they may be put are boons to state interests. Thus, insofar as technologies may be employed in service of ends that are threats to the state as well as ends that serve state interests, they pose dilemmas to holders of state power: how can states

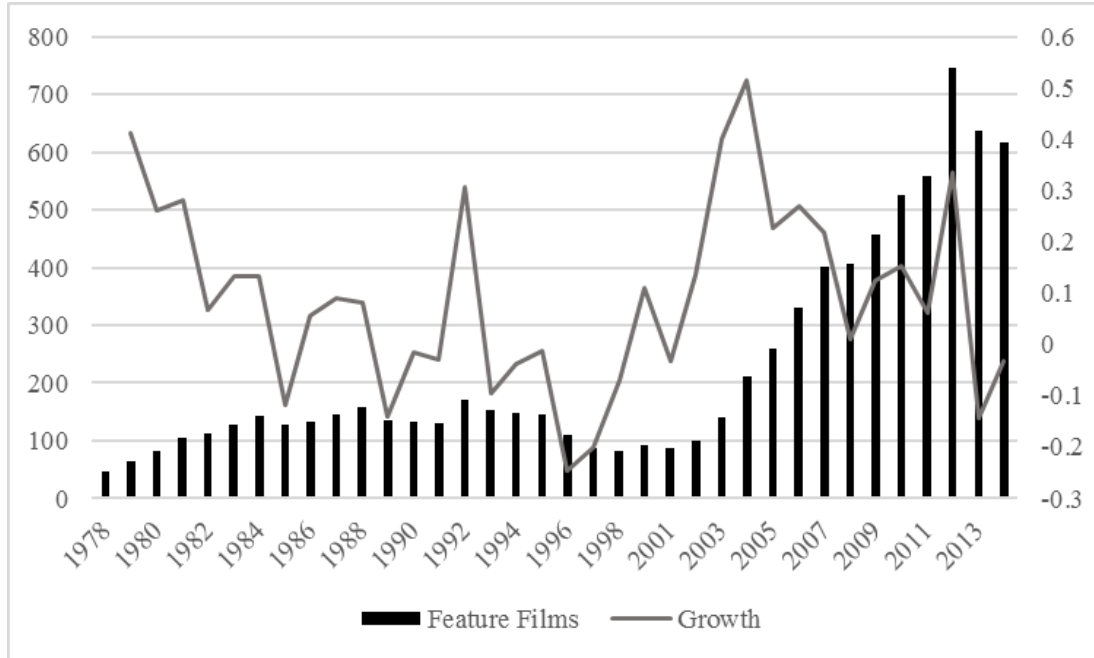
manage their threats without sacrificing their advantages? As I have argued, state attempts to resolve these dilemmas conform to three qualities of control, each of which reflects a particular quality of the organization of social capacity in society. In the realm of media—the means of communication—such organization reflects the qualities of the technologies themselves as employed within a particular socio-practical context: the information ecology. Within this context, states maneuver with relative agility depending on the institutional features and administrative constraints of their own regimes and the political imperatives of the moment. I argue that although the outcomes of these interactions will vary significantly across media-ecological and political contexts, they nonetheless will concatenate in ways that conform to the three fundamental dimensions of capacity and control: authority, access, and autonomy.



### CHAPTER THREE: THE CHINESE FILM ECOLOGY

Film is one of the most dynamic media industries in China. In 2012, China eclipsed Japan to become the second-largest film market in the world and is now projected to surpass the United States as the world's largest film market by 2017 (IBIS 2014; Economist 2013). Since 2003, rates of growth in the Chinese film industry have actually dwarfed China's remarkable GDP growth rates. From 2003 to 2013, box-office returns grew by 34.6 percent annually, from 160 million USD to 3.48 billion USD (Coonan 2014). In 2014, as Chinese moviegoers went to the theater 830 million times, box office revenues grew by another 36 percent to 4.76 billion USD (Coonan 2015). Prior to 2003, China averaged approximately 118 domestically produced feature films per year. Since then, production has ballooned to, on average, 441 films per year (NBS 2014; Fig. 1). In fact, the number of theaters in China can hardly support the demand of China's burgeoning middle class. 1,015 cinemas and 5,397 screens were added in 2014—on average, 15 new screens each day—bringing the nation's total to 23,600 screens (Coonan 2015).

The enormous potential of the film industry has not gone unnoticed by the Chinese state. In 2009, for example, China's State Council elevated the film industry to the level of a "strategic industry" (Entgroup 2010). Investment in the cultural industries, of which the film industry is a part, doubled between 2006 and 2010, totaling 150 billion yuan, and is seen as a crucial component of the state's effort to extend "soft power" globally (Nye 2004, Xinhua 2011; Johnson 2012). And in 2011, the Ministry of Culture announced the state's goal to raise the value-added output of China's cultural industries from 2.78% of GDP to 5% by 2016 (Xinhua 2011).

**Figure 3.1. Domestic Feature Film Production, 1978 - 2014**

Source: NBS 2014

Dating as far back as China's Nationalist period of the 1920s, film has been touted for its propagandistic potential (Johnson 2012, pp. 154- 162). Of course, such ideological power can be used either in service or in opposition to state interests. As a mass medium with an increasingly wide reach, a single critical film has the potential to malign the carefully constructed image of the Party and of life in China. It, therefore, presents a striking dilemma for the CCP: facilitating the development of the film industry may conflict with the need to manage public discourse.

However, the manner by which the Chinese state attempts to resolve this dilemma is by no means predetermined, nor is there an infinite range of responses available to the state. Rather, the state must choose from a limited set of response types, each reflecting the constraints imposed upon it by the film ecology, an arena which it shapes in turn. And from the perspective of state control, China's feature film ecology is as close to ideal as any of the information

ecologies under study. That is, several features of the film ecology lend themselves to direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of control. These features include 1) the highly coordinated nature of film authorship, production, and consumption, which engender dependent social capacities; 2) capital-intensive factors of production, which engender concentrated social capacities; 3) and the inheritance of China's socialist past, from which it has retained public authority over key distributional capacities. On the one hand, these constraints reflect the resources required to make use of media and the social practices associated with their use; on the other hand, they reflect the administrative capacities and political-ideological imperatives of the state itself.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the scope conditions of my analysis. Throughout the chapter, I will focus on the dramatic feature-length film ecology. However, films are neither necessarily dramatic nor feature-length. Below I give an explanation of the distinction, as well as a justification for my chosen focus.

### **Dramatic Feature Film vs. Digital Documentary Film**

The term feature film alludes to a time when a movie ticket might include one longer or “feature-length” film and one or more “shorts,” films with significantly shorter run-times. Although the practice of showing multiple formats at one screening is no longer common, feature films continue to be distinguished from film shorts in terms of their run-times. What length constitutes a feature is somewhat arbitrary, though the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute, and the British Film Institute each suggest that a feature is any film

longer than 40 minutes (Kuhn and Westwell 2012). Given shorter run-times, shorts often require fewer resources to produce than do feature films. Shorts also tend to serve different purposes, especially from the vantage point of a director: a film short is often a means of gaining recognition and, in turn, earning funding for a bigger project. For this reason, film shorts often do not have major theatrical releases; they are frequently distributed via film festivals which attract film aficionados as opposed to general audiences. Features and shorts, then, are subject to quite different dynamics of authorship, production, distribution, and consumption.

Film may also be distinguished in terms of its content type. That is, dramatic film may be contrasted to documentary film. Dramatic and documentary films are distinguished, primarily, by the fact that the former utilizes scripts, actors, and props to fabricate imagined life, and the latter uses a camera to record life as the director sees it. Although a dramatic film may be based on real-life events, it can never be more than a simulation of life. A documentary, in contrast, attempts “the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world” (Renov 1993, 11).

The documentarian’s capacity to tell stories that bear a certain “lifelike” authenticity carries with it enormous ideological and propagandistic potential, something that has not been lost on the CCP. From the inception of the People’s Republic until today, documentary film has been an essential political tool serving the ends of “nation building and national education” (Chu 2007, 28). Today, the CCP guards the use of this tool rather jealously, but radical reductions in the cost of digital video cameras have increased access to documentary filmmaking capacities as well as the autonomy with which documentary films can be produced and distributed. The result is that patterns of control over digital documentary films diverge significantly from those of dramatic feature-length films. Therefore, the reader is asked to bear in mind that the following is not an analysis of the film ecology, as such, but of the dramatic feature-film ecology.

## **The Information Ecology of Film**

In what follows, I trace the journey of a dramatic feature film from conception to consumption, highlighting along the way those features specific to the medium of film as well as those specific to the Chinese milieu, each of which will serve as points of comparison and contrast with the information ecologies introduced in subsequent chapters. From the vantage point of a state seeking to manage political speech, China's feature film ecology has some particularly salient features which, taken together, lend themselves to direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of control. These features include significantly capital-intensive factors of production; the highly coordinated-dependent nature of film authorship, production, and consumption; and the inheritance of China's communist past, from which it has retained in public hands the authority over key distributional capacities.

### *Film Production*

The social practices associated with the feature film ecology are distinct for several reasons, not least of which is the significant dependencies that they engender. From the creative side of production—what I refer to as authorship—to the consumption of films in theaters, the film ecology is governed by processes that require collective social action. Above all, this includes the creation of the media product itself, a cinematic film. Whereas the creative aspect of book, newspaper, or social media production almost uniformly begins with a single author (if not, then a small group of authors), there is no such necessary starting point for a film. One might compare the work of a book author to that of a screenplay writer—a single author (or small group of

authors) responsible for creating the content of an information good. However, unlike a book manuscript, a screenplay is not a final information good; it is not, in itself, suitable for mass consumption. A screenplay is, rather, a component, an input necessary for the production of a final information good, and the audience for a screenplay is limited to those parties involved in movie production (and, perhaps, distribution), but not movie watchers as such.

The inspiration of a film may be supplied variously by the author of a screenplay, an actor whose talent is in high demand, or a director with a particular aesthetic vision or style. However, the final product—the film—will ultimately require the mobilization of the skills and resources of many distinct parties. Beyond the director, the screenplay writer, and any lead actors, the film may require several, if not dozens or hundreds of supporting actors. Depending on the budget of the film, film crews of varying size and scope will be necessary, including set designers, costume designers, pre- and post-production technicians of various kinds, and specialized administrative staffs (Table 1).

**Table 3.1. Feature Film Production Roles**

<i>Line Producer</i>	Manages a film's timeline and budget
<i>Director of Photography (DOP)</i>	Manages how the film is lit and shot
<i>Production Designer/Art Director</i>	Manages the design of the set
<i>Gaffer</i>	Chief lighting technician
<i>1st Assistant Director (1st AD)</i>	Manages the set according to the needs of the director
<i>Editor</i>	Cuts the film together
<i>Production Manager</i>	Manages all people and operations on the set

<i>Sound Recordist</i>	Manages sound recording
<i>Focus Puller</i>	Responsible for focusing the camera
<i>Clapper Loader</i>	Loads the camera, takes care of the stock and records each take
<i>Location Manager</i>	Responsible for finding and securing locations
<i>Grip</i>	Operates the equipment for supporting and moving the camera while shooting
<i>Continuity/Script Supervisor</i>	Ensures that everything seen on camera is consistent from shot-to-shot
<i>2nd Assistant Director (2nd AD)</i>	Assists the 1st AD, particularly coordinating actors to and from set
<i>3rd Assistant Director (3rd AD)</i>	Works closely with the 1st AD; is always on set and often co-ordinates the runners
<i>Boom Operator</i>	Ensures microphone is as near as possible to actors without being in the shot
<i>Sparks</i>	Lighting technicians
<i>Costume Designer</i>	Designs, purchases, and manages costumes
<i>Hair/Makeup Designer</i>	Designs and usually executes, hair and makeup
<i>Production Coordinator</i>	Works under the production manager to co-ordinate the smooth running of the set
<i>Storyboard Artist</i>	Works with the director to create a shot by shot storyboard of the action to be filmed
<i>Stills Photographer</i>	Takes still images of actors and crew for publicity reasons
<i>Various Runners and Assistants</i>	Running various errands

(BBC 2014)

Because it is not possible to mobilize each of these actors without a significant baseline investment of financial capital, financial investors are a part of the production process from very

early on in a film's lifetime. As China's film industry matures, as production teams utilize increasingly sophisticated technology, and as China nurtures its own flock of celebrity movie superstars, even studios have to look beyond their own equity to finance feature films. In recent years, private investors from outside the film industry have funded film production with increasing frequency and with increasingly large sums of money. Prior to 2010, investment in Chinese films was limited to between 400 and 500 companies. However, due to risks in traditional investment sectors, such as construction and the stock market, investors began to look elsewhere, including the film industry. In 2010, outside investment in the film industry came from over 1,100 different companies, and by 2012, 70% of feature films were either wholly or partially funded with investments from privately owned organizations. (EntGroup 2011, p. 8; EntGroup 2013; Xiang and Walker 2013). Indeed, since 2009, several Chinese film production companies, including six private and two state-owned companies, have sought finance in capital markets (EntGroup 2010; EntGroup 2012, p. 8). As I will argue below, there is good reason to expect, not only that a film's investors will be motivated by different goals than the artistic members of a film's collective author, but also that they will be constrained in quite dissimilar ways. But insofar as these actors depend on each other's distinct social capacities in order to create the final information good—the film—their inputs each weigh heavily on the outcome and shape opportunities for state control.

Feature film production is, therefore, an inherently collective endeavor, involving multiple interdependent authors whose actions must be coordinated in order to create an information good. Whereas the creative aspect of text-based media production almost uniformly begins with a single author or a small group of authors, the creative aspect of film production is a process that necessarily involves groups of actors with quite distinct creative-productive



capacities and, potentially, quite distinct motivations and goals. One result of this feature of the film ecology is that film production companies, more so than, for example, book publishers, are instrumental in determining whether the germ of a film—a writer's screenplay, a director's vision, an actor's unique talent—ever actually sprouts and flowers. In the simplest formulation, a film production company connects the people (directors, cast, crew, post-production technicians) and resources (finances, equipment, and physical space) necessary to produce films. A film production company may or may not employ these people directly or own these resources outright—often it will not—but its role in connecting these actors and resources places it in a rather central position in any film ecology. Film production companies vary so widely in terms of the resources at their disposal that the smallest and largest production companies can resemble altogether different types of organizations.

The largest production companies may not only own equipment and employ or have ongoing contracts with these various productive agents, but may also operate their own production facilities, sites at which movies can be filmed and edited. During the “Golden Age” of Hollywood (late 1920s - early 1960s), it became popular to refer to those production companies that owned their own facilities as “studios.” Although many production companies today rent rather than own their own studio facilities, it is still common in the United States, as well as in China, to refer to the largest production companies as studios. As will be shown below, many of these large-scale production studios are also directly involved in the marketing, promotion, and exhibition of films and, therefore, are implicated in the heavy concentration of social capacity in the film ecology

At the other end of the spectrum, the smallest production companies may be composed of a small staff, organized around a producer: a person who may have very little creative or

technical skills related to filmmaking, but who is ultimately responsible for connecting and coordinating the various roles necessary to produce a movie. Although the smallest production companies may not employ any of these personnel, nor own any of the equipment necessary for them to perform their duties, they will nonetheless have relationships with them that no individual creative-productive actor is likely to have on his or her own. Above all, then, a producer is a person with connections and a production company is in the business of coordinating the talents of various people in pursuit of making a film.

The indispensable role played by producers suggests the dependency that is an inherent quality of dramatic film production. Such dependencies can be exploited in service of preemptive forms of control, with or without direct or centralized modes of control. This is a subject I will return to below, but suffice it to point out now that the interdependent nature of film production promotes a heightened sense of caution on the various parts of the collective film author. Insofar as filmmakers depend on outside investment to mobilize the capacities necessary to produce a film, those investors have influence over the content of the film, and if investors fear that a film will never see the light of day, they are unlikely to spend money on it. In a word, a production team is only as radical as its financiers who, as will be shown below, are likely to be more concerned with the bottom line than with the political or artistic merit of a film.

In sum, no single actor can author or produce a feature film on his own because the actions, skills, and resources of individuals and organizations must be coordinated and mobilized in order to employ these means of communication. Film authorship and production, then, are inherently coordinated social capacities that result in significantly dependent relationships. Within these relationships, organizations with greater access to capital—studios or outside

investors—may have outsized influence on a film’s content. I turn to the nature of these organizations below.

### *Concentrated Social Capacity*

Two notable features of the Chinese film ecology engender extraordinarily dense concentrations of social capacity that act as barriers to entry into film production. On the one hand, the capital-intensive nature of film production constitutes a significant obstacle to participation for would-be filmmakers. On the other hand, state interventions since the 1990s have favored the horizontal integration of the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors of the film industry. Such “conglomeration” gives significant advantages to those actors who can exploit economies of scope as well as economies of scale, leveraging relationships between networks of distribution and exhibition.

Perhaps the most significant barrier to participation in film production is the cost of manufactured capital. The technical equipment and facilities required to film, edit, and, ultimately, manufacture movies are both expensive and subject to frequent technological turnover. Filming equipment and facilities require constant maintenance and the best films also rely on advanced post-production software, subject to constant innovation, to produce quality visual effects (IBISWorld 2014). Film production, therefore, has significant manufactured capital inputs. This is evidenced by the nature of the industry’s purchasing costs and its capital-to-labor expenditure ratio. In 2013, 55% of industry revenues were used to acquire “filming equipment, sound systems, props, and post-film services,” and another 12% of industry revenue was used to maintain or replace equipment and facilities, reflecting relatively high levels of depreciation

(IBISWorld 2014). Using the ratio of depreciation to wages as a proxy for capital intensity, IBISWorld estimates that for every dollar spent on labor (wages and management), the Chinese production industry spent 96 cents replacing manufactured capital (facilities, machinery, and equipment) (IBISWorld 2014). By comparison, in 2013, the book publishing, printing, and selling industries had depreciation/labor ratios of \$0.51, \$0.33, and \$0.23, respectively.

The capital necessary to produce feature films, therefore, poses a thoroughly steep barrier to entry into the film production industry. The height of this barrier helps to account for the dense concentration of both industry revenue and the number of films produced in the hands of just several organizations. In 2013, 848 enterprises operated 1,598 film production companies, but of these enterprises, fewer than half were involved in producing the 638 domestic releases that year (IBIS 2014; MPA-CFCPC 2014, p. 24). Moreover, the top five production companies accounted for nearly half (45%) of industry revenue in 2013; and in 2011, the top 20 companies accounted for 92 percent of industry revenue (IBIS 2014; EntGroup 2012; see Table 2). These enterprises can take advantage of significant economies of scale, mobilizing the same resources—sets, equipment, even labor—to use in the production of multiple films. They, therefore, have significant advantages over smaller production companies in terms of both the number and quality of the films they are able to produce.

**Table 3.2. Market Share of Top Producers, 2011**

Top 3	23.72
Top 5	35.92
Top 10	60.59
Top 15	77.43
Top 20	92.49

Source: EntGroup 2012

Access to financial and manufactured capital, therefore, represents a crucial barrier to entry into film production and helps to account for the dense concentration of productive actors in the film ecology. However, the largest production companies in China are not simply economies of scale. Rather they are also economies of scope, reflecting the increasing integration of the film production, distribution, and exhibition industries. Such concentration has been facilitated by state interventions which, since the 1990s, have promoted the vertical and horizontal integration of film production, distribution, and exhibition industries.

Beginning in 1978, China embarked on what has come to be known as its “reform and opening up” (改革开放 *gǎigé kāifàng*) period, characterized by a series of policies intended to liberalize certain non-critical sectors of the economy while opening markets to limited free trade. Gradually, several sectors of China's economy experimented with various forms of private ownership or public-private partnerships, and many of the remaining state-owned enterprises were forced to raise revenues independently of central state coffers. At the same time, the “opening up” component of the reforms included signing on to several regional trade agreements throughout the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in China’s accession to the World Trade

Organization (WTO) in 2001. Over the last 30-plus years, China's reforms have permeated virtually every sector of the economy, and China's cultural industries, including film publication, are no exception. China's state-owned movie studios have been subjected to market pressures, forced to compete with their foreign counterparts, and have even, in certain respects, been privatized. It was during this period that the state began to permit the private production of films though, as will be detailed later in this chapter, only after express authorization by the state.

All of this happened precisely at a time when China's film industry was amid an extended downturn. China's state-run studios had not previously had to worry about making films that audiences wanted to see—their budgets and production targets were fixed in the annual plan, and their primary goal was to produce “main melody” propaganda films. When forced to raise revenues on the market, however, they found it difficult to entice Chinese audiences into purchasing tickets. Fearing that it would be suffocated by an influx of Hollywood films, the CCP took steps to bolster China's domestic film industry. Throughout the 1990s, the state toyed with several initiatives in order to stimulate the Chinese film industry, including extending the right to produce films from 16 state run studios to 13 provincial studios, as well as allowing private investors who could raise 70% of the capital necessary to produce a film to co-produce with a state-run studio (Zhu 2002a, p. 916). Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, anyone with the requisite capital could apply for a filming permit, and the majority of films produced in 1998 came from non-state production teams (Zhu 2002b, p. 192).

But although these reforms opened the door to a more decentralized and privatized film industry, they were not sufficient to stave off competition from Hollywood. To that end, the state facilitated several mergers of local studios, production companies, and distribution and exhibition companies into regional film groups that could compete with Hollywood studios by

virtue of their ability to raise capital and their dominant positions in regional distribution and exhibition and exhibition networks (Zhu 2002b; Zhu and Nakajima 2010). During this time, the state also facilitated the merger of the China Film Group (CFG), a state owned conglomerate involved in every facet of the film industry from production, finance, distribution, and exhibition (Yeh and Davis 2008). As I will argue below, the CFG is not simply a major player in the film industry, but also a major mechanism by which the state exercises control over the film ecology.

The result of these reforms has been the steady integration of China's production, distribution, and exhibition industries and the emergence of a group of conglomerates that consistently dominate both the production and distribution sides of film in China. Today, state-owned China Film Group consistently ranks at the top of the list in terms of both production and distribution market shares. In 2013, it accounted for 17 and 30 percent of production and distribution industry revenues, respectively (IBISWorld 2014; EntGroup 2014, p. 10). In fact, the top four production companies in China—China Film Group Corporation (16.9%), Huayi Brothers Media Group (HBMG, 10.2%), Bona Film Group Limited (7.3%), Beijing Enlight Group (6.8%)—all consistently rank within China's top five to ten distribution companies (IBISWorld 2014; EntGroup 2011; 2012; 2013). China Film Group (CFG) and Huayi Brothers Media Group (HBMG) both also operate their own chains of movie theaters, and HBMG has expanded into the music industry, artist management, and TV drama production (IBISWorld 2014).

In short, although recent regulatory reforms have created opportunities for a more diffuse base of independent production companies, most of the capital in the film ecology is owned and operated by a densely-concentrated group of production studios. This concentration has, in turn, been reinforced by state efforts to integrate various sectors of the film ecology. The result of

industry concentration has been an increase in the number of high quality domestically produced Chinese films able to compete with imports. However, the success of such interventions might not have been possible had the consumptive capacity of the Chinese film audience remained stagnant. In the next section, I argue that Chinese film consumers are significant drivers of China's film industry transformation. However, Chinese audiences are not a monolithic group. Rather, they are comprised by an emergent middle class with increasing amounts of disposable income and a larger group of working poor for whom movie tickets remain a luxury.

### *Film Consumption*

The substantial growth of the film industry in recent years is due, in large part, to growing demand from an emergent Chinese middle class. As China's citizens enjoy increasing amounts of leisure time and disposable income, going to the movies has become an increasingly popular social activity. In 2014, box office sales spiked 36 percent over the previous year as 830 million tickets were sold in China (Coonan 2015). Over the past several years, this new demand has stimulated growth in the construction of movie theatres and movie screens nationwide (EntGroup 2010, p. 9). In 2012, for example, China added 10 movie screens per day to reach 18,000 total screens—quadruple the number from 2007 (Economist 2013). The dynamism of China's film industry, therefore, reflects the dynamism of China's economy generally.

Nevertheless, great variation exists in the ways that Chinese audiences consume films and such variation, I will argue, impacts the nature of control over the film ecology. Although the supply side of the Chinese film ecology is characterized by dense concentrations of social capacity and significant dependencies, the demand side is somewhat Janus-faced. On the one



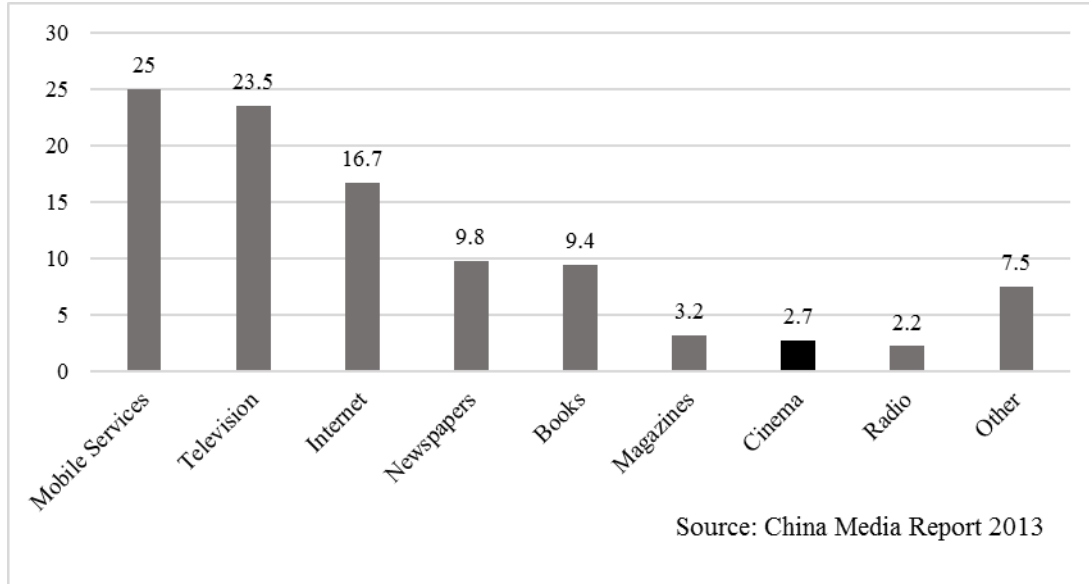
hand, watching a film in a theater is an inherently collective and, thus, dependent activity. On the other hand, with increasing access to films on DVD, as well as the ability to stream films online, consumptive capacity for many Chinese is rather autonomous. Indeed, this is how most Chinese audiences consume film. It is useful, therefore, to conceive of two separate Chinese film audiences: those who can consume films in theaters and those who tend to consume them outside of theaters. Although one may refer to this second group as the "home audience," it is increasingly common for these consumers to watch films on computers at internet cafes or on their mobile devices. Therefore, they are technically non-theater consumers.

Insofar as films are released to theaters, the activities of large groups of people must be coordinated in time and space. Moviegoers must watch movies at specified times, in specified places, and these times and places are likely to be those that are convenient for the greatest numbers of people—typically evenings or weekends and in densely trafficked areas. Moviegoers are, therefore, dependent on both the availability and the proximity of other moviegoers, and these social dependencies predispose film consumption to preemptive forms of control. Because films must be released to theaters according to a predetermined schedule, the state can intervene and actually stop the exhibition of films that have already been distributed to theaters virtually at a moment's notice. The Hollywood blockbuster *Django Unchained* (2013), for example, had not only been approved for distribution, but tickets had been sold, and customers had been seated, when it was pulled from theaters nationwide on the day of its theatrical debut. In some cases, this happened after the film had already begun screening. According to one microblogger,

After watching it for about a minute, it stopped! ... Staff then came in and said [film censors] ... had called to say it had to be delayed!! (Kaiman 2013)

This last anecdote is, technically, not an example of preemptive control, but it illustrates the point nonetheless. When the actions of large numbers of individuals must be coordinated, they must typically be planned in advance. The very fact of this planning is one form of preemptive control, but it opens up the door to other forms that are simply not possible when consumers can independently decide when, where, and how to consume media, a point to which I will return frequently over the course of this dissertation. In this case, consumptive dependencies in combination with the fact that the state had the authority to make such a demand, resulted in the nearly immediate cessation of a film's exhibition mid-reel. Such a feat would be unfathomable if audiences were autonomously consuming film, as they can via DVD, for example.

Despite the rapid growth of the film industry, however, going to the movies regularly, if at all, is still out of reach for many Chinese. The average ticket price in China is around 6.50 USD, though ticket prices vary widely—tickets can be as cheap as 3.50 USD or as expensive as 16 USD depending on region and city (Coonan 2014; Burkitt 2012). For many Chinese, these prices make going to the movies seem somewhat extravagant, especially when pirated DVDs are so readily available (Peng 2013). It may not be surprising, then, that in 2012 the film industry led only radio in terms of media market share (Fig. 2).

**Figure 3.2. Chinese Media Sector Market Share (%), 2012**

Indeed, when one considers the fact that China's total and adult populations are 1.36 billion and 1.14 billion, respectively, the 830 million tickets sold in 2014 no longer seem so remarkable. Instead, they indicate that the average Chinese adult saw a movie in the theater less than once in 2014. In contrast, as early as 1999, 60 percent of Beijing's residents reported watching a film at home once per week, primarily via pirated media (Pang 2007, p. 108). Similarly, in 2009, the Chinese Film Copyright Association surveyed 1,200 residents in fourteen large and medium-sized cities and found that, on average, respondents watched 57 films per year (Rosen 2012, p. 200). Only 7 percent of the respondents were most likely to watch a film in theaters; most were likely to watch a film on the Internet (47%), on television (29%), or on disk (DVD or VCD, 17%) (Rosen 2012, p. 200). Despite rapid and continuing growth in the number of Chinese moviegoers, the fact remains that many more Chinese will consume film products via pirated media—either on DVD, VCD, or online—and with far greater frequency than they will at the theater.

There exist, therefore, two separate consumer bases in the ecology of film: a theater going and a private or home-viewing consumer base. On the hand, home consumers are far more numerous. They, therefore, constitute the "mass" of the mass audience, and magnify the threat posed by the diffusion of a politically sensitive movie. On the other hand, theater-going consumers represent by far the greatest source of revenue for films and, thus, have an outsized influence on a film's success or failure. As I will argue below, the influence of theater-going consumers results in a blockbuster driven market, where efforts to attract larger audiences drive up the costs of films as well as incline filmmaking toward conservatism.

### *Film Distribution*

Although films can be released in multiple formats—in movie theaters, on TV, or on DVDs—in China, the most profitable form of release, by a wide margin, is in theaters. This is due, in part, to the nature of film as an audiovisual form of media, but also due to the particularities of the Chinese film ecology. As with all media, films transmit information, a non-rivalrous good. That is, the consumption of information does not reduce the quantity of information available to anyone else—information can be used, but it cannot be used up. However, the particular form of medium constrains *how* people consume information, including how many people can consume it at any given time. Unlike a book or a newspaper, which are best-suited for individualized consumption, a film can be consumed by a group of people simultaneously. Although it costs a great deal of money to produce a film, each additional print of the film costs relatively little and can be shown to multiple people simultaneously at negligible extra cost. Therefore, in the effort to maximize return on investment, film distributors must devise ways of maximizing the reach of

a film. The first way to maximize the reach of a film is to increase the size of the viewing audience: the more people who go see a movie, the more revenue a movie earns. The second way is to increase the number of formats of a film's release: the more ways an individual consumer purchases a movie, the more revenue a movie earns (Peng 2013).

In the United States, this fact has given rise to what is referred to as the release window system. A film is ordinarily released to theaters for a limited period of time, during which it is withheld from release from other "ancillary" modes of exhibition, such as on DVD or on television. Only after the close of the theatrical release window is a film released to DVD. However, coinciding with the rise of cable television and home video (VHS and DVD) sales in the United States, worldwide theatrical releases have decreased in terms of revenue share. Since the mid-1980s, a film's theatrical release has tended *not* to earn the greatest share of its revenue, and since the 1990s, it has tended to earn the least (Table 3). This worldwide standard presents a stark contrast to film exhibition in China, where the theatrical release consistently accounts for more than 80% of a film's revenue (Peng 2013; EntGroup 2013).

**Table 3.3. Worldwide revenue receipts for Hollywood major studios, 1948-2007, in US\$ billions (2007 dollars)**

Year	Total Revenue	Theater	Share	Video/DVD	Share	TV	Share
1948	8.5	8.5	100%	0	0%	0	0%
1980	9.2	4.9	53%	2.2	24%	4.1	45%
1985	13.3	3.3	25%	2.6	20%	7.4	56%
1990	22.4	6.8	30%	6.5	29%	10.1	45%
1995	29.7	6.2	21%	11.9	40%	11.6	39%
2000	35.1	6.5	19%	13.1	37%	15.5	44%
2005	46.5	7	15%	22.6	49%	16.9	36%
2007	42.9	8.8	21%	17.9	42%	16.2	38%

Source: Vogel (2011), p. 98.

There are at least two reasons for the disparity between box office and ancillary (TV, DVD, and online) exhibition revenues in China. First, the second highest single revenue source for film in China comes from the television sector and is virtually monopolized by the state-owned television station CCTV6. Under an arrangement by the State Administration on Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT, formerly SARFT), CCTV6 purchases the rights to close to 90% of the domestically produced films each year (Peng 2013). Furthermore, due to its near monopoly position in the market and due to the fact that it operates channels across the entire country, CCTV6 is able to demand extremely low prices for broadcasting rights. Second, whereas DVDs produce the most revenue for Hollywood films worldwide, in China DVD revenue is negligible (Table 4). This is largely a function of the ease with which one can acquire pirated films in China, where piracy violations are enforced with extremely low frequency (Peng 2013; Dimitrov 2009, p. 108). It is estimated that almost 90% of Chinese film

consumption occurs via pirated products, either on DVD/VCD or via the Internet (Li 2012; Rosen 2012).

**Table 3.4. Domestic Revenues for the Chinese Film Market, 2007-2012**

<b>Revenue (millions yuan)</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
Theatre Box Office	3,327	4,341	6,206	10,172	13,115	17,073
Revenue from other exhibition channels combined (estimated)	650	790	10,70	1,640	2,640	2,900
Revenue from TV channels	370	390	440	510	620	690
Revenue from DVDs/Blu-rays	50	30	20	20	20	10
Revenue from online exhibition	10	40	90	150	320	500
Theatre Share	83.7%	84.6%	85.3%	86.1%	83.2%	85.5%

Source: Peng (2013)

In China, therefore, the box office is, if not the only game in town, by far the most important one. There is a positive feedback effect at work here as well: the need to succeed at the box office drives studios to employ celebrity actors and directors, as well as cutting edge technology and special effects. These premiums attract larger audiences, but they also drive up the cost of a film which, in turn, increases the need for unambiguous box office success. The box-office driven market creates the conditions for a blockbuster driven market and, as I will argue below, militates against niche, avant-garde, or politically risky films.

In sum, film releases to theaters are "singular media events ... hailed as triumphs or failures within the first two weeks of release" (Curtin 2007, p. 245). The imperative for filmmakers to recoup production costs at the box office is, then, perhaps the greatest constraint

on a film's content. Filmmakers need to make films that will earn at least as much as they cost to produce, and although the return on investment of a successful film can be as high as 200% or 300%, a box office flop may not even cover production costs (EntGroup 2014, p. 24). In addition to being very costly, film production is also, therefore, an extremely risky enterprise. Furthermore, because film production is an inherently collective enterprise, the risk of failure is borne by multiple actors: the film's director, its actors, its production company, and its investors. Though myriad players are involved in each of the many aspects of film production, distribution, and exhibition, the product is, ultimately, a single film. Due in large part to the fact that films are so easily pirated, Chinese film producers are heavily—almost exclusively—dependent on the success of films at the box office. The box office is, therefore, a market-based conduit through which all films must pass if they seek to earn revenue. In what follows I will argue that, in China, the state has used this dynamic to devolve the burden of censorship to the private sector. By controlling key distributional capacities—either directly or indirectly—the state ensures that no film can reach movie theaters without adhering to rather vague content standards, and passes most of the responsibility for censorship onto filmmakers themselves.

### **Control**

The features of the film ecology outlined above lend themselves to particular qualities of control. Notably, the film ecology conforms to the structure that Yochai Benkler called an industrial information economy. That is, the film ecology is characterized by capital intensive factors of production, dense concentrations of productive capacity, and relatively diffuse consumptive capacity. However, as I have shown, factors of production are not the only variables that affect



the distribution or the exercise of social capacity in the film ecology. The social practices associated with film production and consumption affect, not only who has access to social capacity, but also how those with particular capacities interact with each other and the conditions under which they can employ social capacities. Furthermore, concentrations of social capacity are not functions of economics alone: the state itself played a major role in integrating various sectors of the film industry, resulting in levels of concentration that were not purely market driven. Nor is film's consumer base an undifferentiated mass: the consumptive habits of Chinese audiences reflect, not only varied and fluctuating levels of wealth in Chinese society, but also the specific consumptive habits of a country with a thriving black market for media products.

As this suggests, one cannot isolate the information economy from, as it were, the information polity or the information society. Instead, each of the factors above interact to constitute a Chinese film ecology. State attempts to manage political speech are necessarily constrained by these characteristics even as they shape them. As I will argue below, such efforts are exercised primarily through two organizations: The China Film Group and the Central Film Bureau of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). Each organization is, at least in part, a holdover of China's socialist past, when the state had a virtual monopoly over social power as such, controlling every aspect of the Chinese film ecology, from production, to distribution, to exhibition. Today, although each of these functions has been subject to some level of privatization, the state retains significant authority over key distributional capacities. By controlling limited distributional capacities, the state exploits features of the Chinese film ecology that enable it to exercise direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of control.

*Controlling the Border*

As shown above, the China Film Group (CFG) is a state-run enterprise operating at multiple levels of the film ecology. Through its various subsidiaries, the CFG is involved in production, distribution, exhibition, investment, and the development and sale of film technology. In terms of market share, the CFG consistently ranks atop the list of production and distribution companies. Put simply, it is the premier film enterprise in China. Although the CFG was constituted as a bulwark against competition from foreign film productions, it also functions as a key component of China's efforts to manage political speech. In short, the CFG controls which foreign films will be released in China and how they will be distributed.

Foreign films consistently account for about 45 percent of China's box-office revenues (Jaffe 2011; Coonan 2015). However, much to the consternation of the WTO, China enforces an import quota on foreign films in order to shield domestic producers from competition as well as to preserve a "national film identity" (Jaffe 2011). China has resisted pressure from the WTO to drop its foreign film import quota entirely, but has in recent years raised the quota from 20 to 34 films,<sup>3</sup> though the additional 14 films must be in "premium-priced" (3D or IMAX) formats (Abrams 2012). China's limits on foreign films actually amplify the already insatiable demand for access to its emerging entertainment market. However, in order to enter what is now the second largest box-office market in the world, foreign filmmakers must tailor their films to the specifications of China's film censors, whose task is made easier by the fact that the importation and distribution of foreign films is monopolized by the state.

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<sup>3</sup> Co-produced films not subject to this quota, though to count as a co-production some part of the film must be filmed in China, and one third of the film's budget and cast must come from China (LAT 2012; WSJ 2012).

As I have argued above, feature films are extraordinarily costly to produce, yet the cost of exhibiting one, two, or two thousand films is essentially fixed. Thus, in order to make revenue, filmmakers need to release films in either more formats or to more people in the same format. From the perspective of Hollywood filmmakers, therefore, entry into the Chinese market is an essential new source of revenue. However, there is only one pathway into China and that is through the China Film Group, which holds the exclusive authority to import foreign films and, together with state-run Huaxia Film Distribution Company (HFDC), a monopoly on the right to distribute foreign films in China. Films that do not conform to particular content standards may either be denied an opportunity for release onto the Chinese market or filmmakers may be asked to edit the film's content for its Chinese release. And all indications are that many studios are willing to cooperate in order to meet these demands. For example, in its 2011 remake of the Cold War drama, *Red Dawn*, US studio giant Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) agreed to digitally replace all Chinese flags and military symbols with North Korean iconography (LAT 2011). And in order for the 2012 science-fiction comedy *Men in Black 3* to pass muster, scenes including "unflattering" images of Chinese people—one in which aliens disguised themselves as Chinese restaurant workers and another in which Chinese tourists have their memories erased—had to be cut (Moore 2012).

Short of censoring a movie entirely, the state may also choose to delay, or otherwise alter its release window. Such was the fate of all foreign movies in June of 2011 when it was announced that no foreign film would be exhibited until the state-sponsored historical drama, *The Beginning of the Great Revival* made 800 million yuan (\$124 million) at the box-office (Zakaria 2011). Thus, even a film that has been permitted entry into the Chinese market can be

effectively censored because the state monopolizes the means of distribution via the CFG and HFDC.

In terms of the social control trilogy, the state is able to effect direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of control over foreign film imports because three conditions are met. First, the capacity to permit entry into, and then distribution throughout China is held publicly, i.e., it is monopolized by the state. Second, such capacity is centralized in the organization of the CFG (and, to a lesser extent, HFDC), a result made possible by the quota on film imports. By capping the number of films to be produced, a quota effectively concentrates the number of organizations producing films by administrative fiat. Third, because the real target for distribution is the Chinese box-office and not auxiliary means of exhibition, filmmakers are dependent on the CFG and HFDC for access to the network of Chinese theaters. From the perspective of the state, therefore, the conditions that obtain in relation to foreign film imports are about as ideal as possible: there exists a single node through which a limited number of information goods *must* pass prior to distribution to a mass audience. By controlling that node, the state relieves itself of the obligation to control any other node in the film ecology, which, in this case, extends well beyond its borders.

Within China's own borders, however, things are necessarily more complicated, and the dilemma of state power more conspicuous. Unlike in relation to foreign films, the Chinese state has a cultural, even a political interest in promoting the development of its own domestic film industry. As I have shown above, in pursuit of this goal, the state has had to allow more private and more autonomous forms of productive capacity in the film ecology, thereby magnifying the dilemma of state power. Nevertheless, significant distributional capacities remain in public

hands, and it is via these capacities that the state is able to manage political speech in the film ecology so effectively. I take up this subject in the next section.

### *Control within China's Borders*

The most direct means by which the state manages to control political speech in film is via the Central Film Bureau (CFB), a division of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). Established in 1949, the CFB was originally responsible for managing the entirety of the socialist film ecology: allocating production resources, setting quotas, and overseeing the licensing, distribution, exhibition, and export of films. Each of these functions was performed in accordance with the Party's propaganda goals and articulated in an annual plan (Zhu and Nakajima 2010, p. 22). Today, the CFB has a much more limited, though crucial role in the management of film. Of interest to this study, the CFB is responsible for reviewing completed films and either granting or denying permission for distribution to theaters.

Until quite recently, all prospective films required authorization prior to filming. In order to receive a filming permit, filmmakers would be required to submit a completed screenplay to the CFB for pre-production approval. In 2013, however, SAPPRFT loosened these restrictions considerably, intending to streamline the production process. Now films that deal with "ordinary" topics will enjoy fast-track pre-production screening, having only to submit a synopsis of the film rather than an entire screenplay (Makinen 2013; Rowe 2013). However, non-ordinary topics—those whose subjects deal with foreign affairs, religion, ethnic minorities, major historical events, cultural celebrities, or crime—remain subject to the same restrictions as in the past. There are, then, explicitly politicized regulatory hurdles, which amount to

administrative dependencies in the film ecology. Those filmmakers who might make a politically sensitive film are subject to markedly greater preemptive forms of control than those who are unlikely to rock the boat.

Of course, these are only a film's initial hurdles. All completed films remain subject to a final screening by a censorship board within the CFB. If a film is found to have violated content restrictions it may either be sent back for revision, or denied permission for a nationwide theatrical release. In administrative terms, it is notable that so few films—several hundred, on average, and only once more than a thousand—will be made in any given year. Moreover, the explicit politicization of the pre-production authorization process allows the state to direct administrative resources toward curbing political speech, and frees private filmmakers to produce non-political cultural products autonomously. This means that it is administratively feasible for the CFB to prescreen each completed film, if necessary, though recent changes made by SAPPRT will drastically reduce the number of items subject to central state oversight.

In 2014, SAPPRT decentralized the authorization process, requiring filmmakers to submit their synopses (or full screenplays for non-ordinary subjects) to provincial Film Bureaus rather than the Central Film Bureau. These changes both reduce the administrative burden on the central state as well as, at least potentially, the time required to begin production on a film. The thinking is that local relationships may help grease the wheels for would-be filmmakers. As director Jiang Wei has said, “In Shenzhen, I’m somebody; I can get stuff done. In Beijing, I’m a nobody” (Peskin 2014). Although some may argue that the decentralization of the authorization process will result in a less strict environment of control, it is likely too early to tell. The devolution of censorship authority to the provincial level will undoubtedly streamline the authorization process, but it may also render that process more cautious and more arbitrary, as

different standards are likely to obtain in different provinces. In any case, SAPPRFT and the CFB retain the authority to override any decision made by local bureaus and, therefore, the buck still stops at the state center.

Beyond simply obstructing the film's distribution, punitive measures may be taken against those whose names are most strongly associated with the film: its director or its celebrity actors. Although it is uncommon for feature film directors or actors to be subject to coercive forms of punishment—detention, arrest, or imprisonment—restrictions may nevertheless be placed on their ability to conduct their art (CECC 2015). After completing a film that touches on sensitive subjects, a director or an actor may be instructed that he or she is forbidden to make another film within a specified period of time. Such was the fate of director Lou Ye who, in 2006, after submitting a film containing scenes of the Tiananmen Square Protests to the Cannes Film Festival, was prohibited from making new films for five years (Jin 2008). In another case, director Ang Lee's *Lust Caution* was banned in China due to racy love scenes. Because the state could not punish Lee, a Taiwanese national, it instead set its sights on lead actress, Tang Wei, who was forbidden from making public appearances or starring in new movies (Jin 2008). Such penalties can be devastating, especially to artists who have invested a lifetime's work into honing their craft. Inevitably, then, for the sake of their careers, film artists in China must seriously consider the risks involved in directing or starring in films that might provoke a critical response from the state.

Although the risks of censorship to an artist's career are high, the financial risk of violating content restrictions is borne disproportionately by production companies and by large corporate investors who, increasingly, come from outside the film industry. The need to attract outside

finance is, ultimately, a need to convince investors that a product can and will make a profit, i.e., that a movie will sell at the box office. But according to Ha Jin,

a banned movie means a huge business loss and more difficulties in finding sponsorship for their next project. It would be suicidal to make two banned movies in a row, so filmmakers have to toe the line (Ha 2008).

The image of self-inflicted harm evoked by "suicidal" is particularly revealing. In China, a producer knows all too well what the consequences of transgressing content restrictions will be, as well as who will bear them. In China's feature film industry, this knowledge leads, in most cases, to a heightened sense of caution. The onus to meet content standards, therefore, remains with those who stand to lose most on a film flop. By ensuring that no film can achieve wide distribution in movie theaters without adhering to somewhat vague content standards, the state passes most of the responsibility for censorship onto film producers who have significant economic incentives to comply.

### **Conclusion**

The introduction of private investment capital into film finance has resulted in what Stanley Rosen refers to as the "victory of economics over art" (Rosen 2012, p. 215). In this chapter, I have demonstrated that at the hands of steep economic barriers to participation, political speech has also suffered a defeat. The nature of the production and distribution of a film constrains the actions of actors within the film industry as well as those of the state. As box office revenues have become the predominant measure of a film's success, films that attempt to push the boundaries of expression do not need to be controlled directly by state officials. Instead, the



responsibility for censorship falls most heavily on the shoulders of film producers and private investors. In the words of film producer, Robert Cain,

the truth remains that no matter who you are, if you want to play in China, you're going to have to play by China's rules. For now and the foreseeable future that means subordinating your creative freedoms to the political and social imperatives of China's government. If you can pull off the trick of telling stories that adhere to censorship strictures while still entertaining the mainstream Chinese audience, the financiers, the distributors, and even the government officials, will beat a path to your door (Cain 2011).

In short, the financial costs of transgressing the vague boundaries imposed by state censors—and the rewards for remaining within them—engender an effective regime of censorship over the Chinese film ecology. These constraints foster a level of conservatism in film production exceeding that of several other information ecologies. The presence of a thriving pirated DVD market indicates that the state does not, perhaps cannot, exercise significant control over the distribution of a film *once it has been made*. However, by controlling box-office distribution through the institution of the CFB, the state can devolve most of the responsibility for—and the administrative legwork of—censorship to private and autonomous, but relatively conservative film authors: directors, actors, and, particularly, investors. Furthermore, by politicizing film subjects, and subjecting politicized themes to preemptive censorship, the state selectively dials down the autonomy of those authors most likely to pose threats to the CCP. Thus, despite recent regulatory reforms that have streamlined and decentralized the authorization and censorship process, giving more autonomy to filmmakers, there nevertheless remains a strong check on political speech. Moreover, by allowing a great deal of autonomy over the creation of non-politicized content, the state promotes the development of the culture industries, which are unsuited to planned direction.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE CHINESE BOOK ECOLOGY

The book publications ecology presents an interesting contrast to that of feature film. Unlike film production, book publishing is one of the least capital-intensive supply-side aspects of any traditional media ecology, and the capital necessary to author or consume books is negligible. Nevertheless, in terms of the total number of enterprises (548), the Chinese book publishing industry is the most densely concentrated media subindustry under study, and despite low economic barriers to access, Chinese book authors and consumers are rather concentrated relative to authors and consumers of other types of media.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the dense concentration of publishers is not simply a function of capital intensity, as Benkler's economic theory of media suggests, but primarily a function of political and administrative factors. Furthermore, this chapter will demonstrate the utility of disaggregating productive capacity into the capacities to author and to publish information goods. Unlike in the film ecology, where the collective nature of production and high financial barriers to productive capacity determine that film authorship is wedded to film manufacture in the organization of the production company, in the book ecology authorship is a potentially autonomous capacity for which very few technical implements are necessary. Concentrations of book authors, therefore, are explained less by economic factors, such as the cost of productive capital, than by social factors, such as the time and skills necessary to write at length.

Finally, this chapter will show that the dilemma of state power is not merely implicated in terms of concentrated or diffuse access to social capacity, but also in terms of the authority and the autonomy with which social capacity may be employed. In other words, the concentration or

diffusion of productive capacity is not the only variable affecting the control regime in China. Notably also, the social practices associated with book publishing generally, and the book publications ecology in China in particular, influence the level of autonomy afforded to authors, publishers, and consumers, as well as the distribution of public vs. private authority over key publishing functions.

I begin this chapter by elaborating the characteristics of the information ecology of book publications. The next section begins with a discussion of what may be termed the “literate” aspects of the book ecology: authorship and readership. Following this, I introduce the industrial side of the book ecology: book publishing. In the last section, I offer my analysis of how the features of the book ecology influence the dominant modes of state control over political speech via this medium.

### **The Information Ecology of Book Publication**

In the simplest formulation, the book ecology in China is characterized by low economic, but high social and political-administrative barriers to social capacity. Book authors and consumers require very little in terms of manufactured capital, but a great deal more than the authors and consumers of other media in terms of education, aptitude, and time. They are, therefore, relatively autonomous social actors who nonetheless are quite concentrated relative to the total population due to the time and skills necessary to author or consume books. The result, I will argue, is that although book authors and consumers are resistant to preemptive forms of control, they also pose less immediate threats to the state than more diffuse media actors.

Moreover, administrative barriers imposed by the state determine that book publishers are particularly densely concentrated group despite relatively low economic barriers to participation. By controlling access to licenses, the state artificially manufactures industry concentration and imposes a relationship of dependency on the part of book publishers. State-sanctioned book publishers, thus, control key distributional capacity and constitute the state's most effective intervention into the book publications ecology.

### *Book Authors*

The life of a book begins when an author who, alone or in collaboration with other authors, writes a book manuscript. Although there are significant barriers to writing a book manuscript, access to productive capital is not very high on the list. Whereas the manufacture of a physical book may be subject to industrial processes of production, authorship requires little productive capital outside of a word processor of some kind. Indeed, it may not even be necessary for one to own a computer to write. Computers are available for use for free at any of China's 3,112 public libraries or for rent at one of China's 113,000 internet cafes (NBS 2014; Hayoun 2014).

Nonetheless, serious authors will probably invest in their own computers and such a cost must certainly be considered a barrier to entry into this aspect of book production.

Notwithstanding the cost of a personal computer, greater barriers to entry are constituted by the time and literacy levels necessary to write a book manuscript. Although it stands to reason that book authors exhibit high levels of literacy, even among the most well-educated members of society, only a select few will ever write and publish a book. This fact may have as much to do with a lack of willingness to undertake such a large, time-consuming project for minimal

financial return as it does with a lack of technical skills. Suffice it to say, then, that due to the skills and time necessary to write a book manuscript, only a fraction of the population will ever pursue such an endeavor.

Although the time, skills, and education levels necessary to author books determine that authorship remains the pursuit of a narrow segment of the adult population, nonetheless these requisite qualities—education and available leisure time—are on the rise in China, given the growth of economy and its middle class. These same processes are also working to create a larger demand for printed books and, thus, also, for authors. Indeed, evidence suggests that the book author community is growing quite rapidly. The number of books published in 2013 was about twice as many as were published in 2005 and three times as many as were published in 2000 (NBS 2014). Unless Chinese writers have doubled and tripled their output in the span of 20 years, these statistics indicate that the number of authors in China is on the rise, i.e., that it has become less difficult, or that authors are increasingly more willing, to publish books in China.

It is probably impossible to determine the actual population of book authors in any country, but one may arrive at a rough estimate by measuring the number of books published per year. Out of an adult population of 1,137,430,000 people, 444,427 book titles were published in 2013 (NBS 2014). Of the 444,427 titles published in 2013, 58% were new titles, meaning 255,981 books were published for the first time in 2013 (ibid.). Given the most liberal interpretation of these statistics, the number of new books published would represent the number of published authors in a given year. However, the number of new books published likely underestimates the actual number of authors published in a given year and certainly underestimates the number of authors in a society, and this is so for at least two reasons.

First, many authors, perhaps most, will not publish a book during each calendar year. Thus, the number of new books neither accounts for those authors who have published books within the last few years, nor for those who are currently working on a manuscript. Of course, some authors may publish more than one book in a year, but these are not likely numerous enough to balance against the authors who take several years to write a book. Therefore, by ignoring the number of authors who are writing but not publishing in a calendar year, the number of newly published books underestimates the number of authors in a society. Second, if any book is authored by more than one person, that book necessarily underestimates its number of authors. Since it is virtually guaranteed that this condition will be met in some proportion of new books published, it can be assumed that the number of newly published books will underestimate the number of authors published in a given year.

On the other hand, not all books—and, by extension, not all authors—are equally likely to be subject to political control. If one excludes science, technology, and engineering-based categories, which amount to 91,105 titles, there were 353,412 titles published in 2013 that were at least potentially political or critical (Table 1). Assuming that approximately 58% of these were new titles, then 204,979 books were actually "authored," in the sense of being completed and published for the first time, in 2013. Thus, although the number of newly published titles likely underestimates the number of authors in China, it also likely overestimates the number of authors who publish books that are potentially critical of the state, the Party, or Chinese culture, generally. That is, only a subset of topics is disposed to politicization and, thus, also to political control.

**Table 4.1. Books Published in China by Categories (2013)**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of Publications</i>
<i>Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought</i>	672
<i>Philosophy</i>	8,195
<i>General Social Sciences</i>	5,256
<i>Politics and Law</i>	17,481
<i>Military Affairs</i>	1,555
<i>Economics</i>	30,144
<i>Culture, Science, Education and Sports</i>	176,189
<i>Languages</i>	21,482
<i>Literature</i>	46,885
<i>Arts</i>	25,782
<i>History and Geography</i>	16,330
<i>General Natural Sciences</i>	915
<i>Mathematics and Chemistry</i>	7,849
<i>Astronomy and Geology</i>	2,561
<i>Biology</i>	2,948
<i>Medicine and Health Care</i>	18,418
<i>Agricultural Science</i>	5,070
<i>Industrial Technology</i>	45,171
<i>Transportation</i>	4,901
<i>Aeronautics and Aerospace</i>	463
<i>Environmental Science</i>	1,923
<i>General Books</i>	3,441
<i>Pictures</i>	796
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>444,427</b>

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) (2014)

In short, one can confidently assume that the number of authors in China is in the range of several hundreds of thousands and not likely much more than a million. This community is, therefore, quite diffuse relative to that of feature film authors, whose creations are the work of a collective, and whose output totaled 638 films in 2013. In contrast, this community is quite concentrated relative to the number of social media users who numbered approximately 350

million in 2013 (Table 2). Moreover, the number of actual and potential book authors is quite diffuse relative to the number of other productive actors—publishers, printers, or book sellers—within the book ecology. They, therefore, constitute less suitable targets for centralized control than, for example, book publishers.

**Table 4.2. Production in China by medium and capacity, 2013**

<i>Medium</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>Production Companies</i>	848
<i>Films</i>	638
<i>Book Publishers</i>	548
<i>New Book Titles</i>	255,981
<i>Social Media (users)</i>	347,600,000

Source: IBISWorld 2014; McCarthy 2014

Aside from constraints on the diffusion of authorial capacity, the social practices associated with book authorship also dispose these capacities to private and autonomous forms of use. In terms of the former, the versatile nature of word processors and other writing implements—of writing itself—make it impractical for the state to expropriate authorial capacity as such. The means of authorship, that is, are as essential to economic and cultural production as they are to political speech and are, therefore, unlikely targets for state expropriation. And in terms of autonomy, unlike the authorship of dramatic feature films, for example, book authors frequently work alone. They may take weeks, months, even years to complete book manuscripts—if they ever complete them at all. The authorship of a book manuscript is a disjointed and indeterminate process for which it is difficult to set a timetable and, thus, also difficult to subject to preemptive forms of control.



There are, then, qualities that inhere in the very activity of book authorship that make it resistant to direct, centralized, or preemptive administration. Low capital-related barriers to entry and the social practices associated with writing long-form result in a relatively decentralized, privatized, and autonomous author base for book publications. These tendencies are, however, mitigated by other barriers to book authorship—intellectual capacity, creativity, and inclination. However, given that there were 255,981 new book titles published in 2013, these barriers are not nearly as steep as those preventing would-be film authors from producing films.

In short, authorial capacity in the book ecology is, relative to that of the film ecology, diffuse, privately held, and autonomous. However, economic factors go only so far in explaining these outcomes. Equally as important are the social practices associated with writing books, which determine that only a portion of society will pursue such endeavors despite quite low economic barriers to access to the physical media. Furthermore, the nature of book authorship—isolated, iterative, and immanently versatile—results in a social capacity that is not easily controlled preemptively, much less expropriated from the private sphere.

### *Book Readers*

The character of a specific form of media is revealed as much by the practices that attend to its consumption as by those associated with its authorship. These practices reflect the qualities of the medium itself, and shape both the nature and size of a medium's potential audience. As with book authorship, the size and nature of the book consuming population is only partly a function of the economic cost of a physical book. In addition to this constraint—or lack thereof—the social practices associated with book consumption constrain how books are consumed and who

is likely to consume them. Like book authorship, book consumption is distinguished from other forms of media by the time and skill that it requires. The result of these constraints is that the time spent with a book is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from the time spent with other media.

Like newspaper consumption, but unlike movie or TV consumption, book consumption is a relatively isolated experience. Though reading certainly has a social component—one may talk or write about books or newspapers after or while reading them, and adults often read to children—reading printed literature is almost uniformly an individualized activity. Books also demand much more than the other media under study in terms of the time required to consume them. Unlike a newspaper, whose value to the average consumer diminishes significantly after its date of publication, a book does not necessarily have, as it were, a "shelf life." Given the length of books, consumption typically occurs over the course of days, weeks, even months—if one finishes a book at all. Books may be read and re-read, put down, and picked back up months, even years later. These factors determine that book consumption is a relatively autonomous capacity and resistant to preemptive forms of control.

The economic barriers to reading are not exactly straightforward. On the one hand, the cost of an actual book is not prohibitive for most Chinese citizens. A popular paperback title may cost about 15 RMB (2.30 USD) and the average price of an e-book is around 5 RMB (0.75USD), considerably less than the cost of a movie ticket (20 – 40 RMB), and in the range of a pound of rice (3 RMB) or a half liter of domestic beer (5 RMB) (Millward 2012; Numbeo 2016). On the other hand, unlike visual or audial media, book consumption has a language proficiency requirement that determines that not everyone in society will be able to consume books, much less the same quality of books. Even those members of society who have the technical capacity

to read, will have varying levels of aptitude and desire to read (or finish) books. The result is that the audience for books may be relatively concentrated despite the fact that books are, in economic terms, quite accessible to the average Chinese consumer. The book reading population is likely to be smaller, better educated, and wealthier—having more leisure time at its disposal—than the consumer population of TV or newspapers, for example. Though audiences for films in the theater may also be concentrated relative to the total population, they are concentrated for reasons of economic resources—the cost of the ticket is prohibitive for many Chinese—not technical skill or desire. In contrast, to the extent that economic capacity impacts one's likelihood to consume books, it is more accurately a function of certain longitudinal attributes of wealth—education and leisure time—than of the cost of a single book.

Although there are no exact statistics on the number of book consumers in China, there are several possible ways to measure the population of book consumers in the printed book ecology. One crude measure is the literate adult population. China has an adult population of 1.14 billion and the most recent adult literacy estimate in China is 95.1% (World Bank), which puts the literate adult population at approximately 1.08 billion. However, since literacy is defined as "the percentage of the population age 15 and above who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life," adult literacy rates are likely to overestimate the number of casual, let alone avid, book readers in a society (World Bank). This is especially true of a reading culture such as China's, which lacks an alphabet. Under such circumstances, the acquisition of new written words entails a rote process of memorization, and the maintenance of learned words requires continual use—regular reading and writing. Indeed, in China and other countries where Chinese is the primary language, retired adults are encouraged to keep a written journal lest they forget the strokes for particular characters.

In short, although the capacity to read and write short sentences may constitute a capacity to function at work and in society, it does not necessarily translate into an aptitude, much less a willingness for reading entire books. Furthermore, given the limited leisure time available to large segments of China's working poor, even a technical capacity or a desire to read is unlikely to make one an avid book reader. This proposition is confirmed by national reading surveys conducted by the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication. In 2013, for example, the average Chinese adult read, in whole or in part, 4.77 books and 2.48 e-books, and only 58 percent of educated<sup>4</sup> Chinese citizens read at least one book per year (CAPP 2014). Of the 25% of non-reading respondents, most blamed the pressures of work for their lack of a reading habit. The literate adult population, then, is best seen as the upper limit in the range of potential book consumers.

Despite the ease with which private citizens can acquire them, books are not the Chinese media consumer's first choice. Each year, the average Chinese adult will read about 77 newspapers and magazines, watch approximately 50 feature films, but read only seven books (CAPP 2014; Pang 2007: 108; Rosen 2012: 200). Indeed, as Table 3 indicates, Chinese citizens spend far less time per day with books than with other media, such as television and the Internet, even when one includes reading on e-readers.

<sup>4</sup> The National Academy of Press and Publication defines the book reading rate as "the population of readers who read at least one book every year divided by the population of educated people in China," but it is not clear what the threshold level of education is.

**Table 4.3. Average Time Spent with Media, 2012 (Minutes/Day)<sup>5</sup>**

<i>Medium</i>	<i>Time Spent</i>
<i>TV</i>	95
<i>Internet</i>	51
<i>Mobile</i>	22
<i>Newspapers</i>	16
<b><i>Books</i></b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Radio</i>	11
<i>Magazines</i>	10
<i>E-reader</i>	2

Source: CAPP 2013

In sum, books are media goods that private Chinese citizens can and do consume autonomously, the cost of which is not a steep barrier to access for most Chinese. Nonetheless, like book authorship, there are social barriers—time, wherewithal, desire—that determine that the population of book consumers is concentrated vis-à-vis other media consumer populations. Book consuming audiences, thus, differ from other media audiences in quantity and quality. They are smaller in size than news and TV audiences, and unlikely to consume media within similar spans of time, as will film, newspaper, and TV audiences. Therefore, despite their autonomy and private capacity, book consumers may present less of an immediate concern to state actors interested in managing the effects of political speech. As I will argue below, these qualities of book consumption afford the state opportunities to pursue more retroactive forms of control over the book publications ecology.

<sup>5</sup> I was not able to access similar comparative data for 2012 and the data for television is from a 2011 study by the same organization.

*Book Publishers*

The focal point of the book publications ecology is the book publishing industry, which in 2013 was a 13.5-billion-dollar industry in China (IBIS 2015). The primary responsibility of a book publisher is to connect authors with audiences, and to this end, publishers provide a suite of services to individual authors. Publishers identify the authors and books that they deem most likely to have success in the marketplace, and, ideally, shepherd an author's work through the marketplace, offering resources, expertise, and connections that a single individual is unlikely to have.

Insofar as publishers play a role in selecting which books get published, they also have a role in rejecting books that will have difficulty seeing their way to market. But publishers do not simply give books thumbs up or down. Publishers are also editors and, therefore, have an authorial role as well. Despite the significant autonomy book authors have relative to film authors, they are not completely autonomous. In a sense, the book that a consumer buys and reads is the outcome of a collaborative effort between an author and a publisher. Publishers staff editorial "experts" who not only edit manuscripts for grammar and spelling errors, but also for consistency in style and format, and even perform fact-checking functions, especially for non-fiction works. Publishers may ask authors to change, to remove, or to add content to a manuscript and, to the extent that these requests are politicized, they are implicated in any regime of information control.

Given the above, it may come as no surprise that publishers also act as investors. Publishers may even provide cash advances to authors to afford them the time and resources necessary to write. Publishers, therefore, are in the position to take risks that individuals or

smaller market actors are unable to take, and give opportunities to projects that are not guaranteed success. This element of risk is a point to which I will return below, but suffice it to say now that it varies significantly from the risks borne by feature film investors. Most obviously, there is a quantitative difference: the investment necessary to publish an author is a paltry sum compared to the investment necessary to produce a feature film. The difference, however, is also in kind: a publisher is investing, not so much in a particular book, but in a particular author. Indeed, not every book is expected to be a success, but in combination with their roles as curators and editors, publishers hope to invest in the careers of authors. Of course, this type of ongoing relationship is not true of every type of publisher-author relationship—it is less likely a characteristic of academic and non-fiction texts than it is of literary texts. It is, however, an aspect of the book publications ecology that impacts the quality of the regime of control in China, a point to which I will return below.

If the basic premise of Yochai Benkler's economic theory of media is that capital-intensive media capacities present high barriers to participation, resulting in dense concentrations of capacity, then book publishing presents an interesting contrast to feature film production. In contrast to film production, book publishing is one of the least capital-intensive supply-side aspects of any traditional media ecology. For example, in 2013, the book publishing industry required, on average, \$0.15 in capital for every dollar spent on labor, trailing only magazine publishing (\$0.11) in this regard (Table 4). In terms of Benkler's theory of media, such low levels of capital-intensive production should engender relatively diffuse access to productive capacity. Indeed, in terms of market share, industry concentration in book publishing is relatively low: the top four enterprises account for only 18.7% of industry revenue. However, in terms of total enterprises (548), the book publishing industry is the most densely concentrated media

subindustry under study. This contrasts sharply with other printed media, such as magazines and newspapers, which have high numbers of enterprises to correspond with low levels of capital intensity, as well as with audiovisual media such as film production, which has few enterprises to correspond with high levels of capital intensity (see also Table 2).

**Table 4.4. Capital Intensity, Total Enterprises, and Market Share in Chinese Media Industries**

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Capital Intensity</i>	<i>Enterprises</i>	<i>Market Share</i>
<i>Magazine Publishing</i>	0.11	2,875	8.6%
<i>Book Publishing</i>	0.15	548	18.7%
<i>Newspaper Publishing</i>	0.34	16,448	12.3%
<i>Film Production</i>	0.96	848	41.2%

Source: IBISWorld 2014

In order to account for the discrepancy between levels of capital intensity and absolute levels of industry concentration, therefore, one must look beyond baseline economic conditions. In the following section, I will demonstrate that the dense concentration of publishers in China is not simply a function of capital intensity, as Benkler's economic theory of media suggests, but primarily a function of political and administrative factors that constitute an essential means by which the state is able to manage political speech in the book ecology. But not only is the access to productive capacity more than simply a function of access to capital, productive capacity in the book ecology is also non-monolithic, i.e., unlike in the film ecology, one can easily disaggregate the functions of authorship, publishing, and physical manufacture.

One of the reasons that the book publishing industry registers only a moderate level of capital intensity is because of industry division of labor: book publishers tend to outsource the



physical manufacture of books to dedicated printers. The printing industry, for its part, requires relatively high capital inputs, its capital/labor expenditure ratio amounting to \$0.51 (IBIS 2014). Despite higher capital intensive inputs, however, book printing is still a more diffuse industry than that of book publishing, though the trend in the industry is toward concentration. In 2013, there were 1,528 book printing enterprises operating 2,566 establishments, amounting to approximately 4.4 printing establishments for every publishing establishment (IBIS 2014). Since 2005, however, the printing industry contracted by 246 enterprises and 695 establishments while shedding approximately 30,000 employees. During this time, industry revenues increased from 7.7 billion USD to 17.3 billion USD, suggesting that the industry is not simply shrinking, but rather changing. As new "computer-to-plate" printing technology replaces "computer-to-film" technology as the industry standard, labor is increasingly automated and capital intensity is on the rise (IBIS 2014).

The physical manufacture of books, then, conforms well to Benkler's economic theory of media: as the industry moves toward increasing automation, capital demands a greater share of industry revenue than labor, and the total number of enterprises contracts even as total industry revenue expands. In contrast, although requiring significantly less manufactured capital, book publishing is a densely concentrated industry. In 2013, there were 548 official book publishers operating 581 establishments and subsidiaries in China. These numbers have remained relatively constant in recent years, with less than ten net additional entrants to the industry since 2006 (IBIS 2014).

As I have shown in the sections above, the book publications ecology is constituted at its periphery by actors who can, in their private capacity, author or consume books autonomously and at minimal financial cost. Despite low economic barriers to access, however, there does not

result in a radical diffusion of actors on the supply or demand side of the book ecology, as Benkler's economic theory of media might predict. Instead, social barriers such as education, aptitude, and time determine that book authors and consumers are concentrated relative to the authors and consumers of other types of media. On the other hand, at the center of the book ecology are book publishers who, similarly, are quite concentrated relative to their counterparts in other traditional media—film studios, newspaper publishers, and TV stations, for example. Again, however, such concentration is not primarily the effect of capital-related barriers to participation. Instead, as I will elaborate further in the next section, the dense concentrations of publishing outfits in China is primarily a political and administrative effect, imposed artificially on the book publishing industry by the state. Given the nature of the book ecology, and the autonomy with which authors and consumers may interact with books, control over the key distributional capacities constitutes the primary mode by which the state is able to exercise control over the book publication ecology.

### **Control**

The dilemma of state power is particularly acute in relation to the printed word. On the one hand, modern states have vested interests in fostering the development of literate citizens who can, at a minimum, participate in the national economy and, ideally, also contribute to the production of cultural goods such as literature. On the other hand, the capacity to read and write necessarily entails the capacity to read or write something threatening to the state. But the expropriation of such capacities from the private sphere would not only be inconsistent with the demands of the market economy; it would also require a totalistic intervention into society of Orwellian scope.

Nor are the capacities associated with literacy easily subjected to dense concentrations of the sort manipulable by the state center or the types of dependencies that might permit preemptive control. As I have argued, the capacity to author or consume books is constrained by the social practices associated with writing or reading long form. However, such barriers pale in comparison to the economic barriers to participation that obtain in the film ecology. On the one hand, the collective and capital intensive nature of film production determines that feature film authors are, in practice, organizations and not individuals. In contrast, book authors are individuals who can create information goods with relatively little coordinated effort from other actors. On the other hand, the coordinated nature of film consumption in movie theaters and the need for film producers to recoup large investments result in film releases as singular, momentous events, concentrated in both time and space. Book consumption, in contrast, is an isolated and iterative process and, thus, inherently autonomous and individualized.

In short, the social practices associated with reading and writing books determine that book authors and book consumers are particularly difficult to control directly, centrally, or preemptively. The result of these qualities of the book ecology is that the state must look elsewhere for opportunities to exercise effective control over speech. Below I argue that the primary locus of state control over speech in the book ecology is in the organization of the book publisher. In China, book publishers have state-sanctioned roles in the distribution of books, the process by which an authored manuscript reaches a mass audience. By managing which books are capable of accessing distribution channels, the state also attempts to manage political speech. This is achieved, first, by tightly controlling the process by which an organization can become a book publisher and, second, by determining that access to distribution channels can only be gained via the approval of state-sanctioned book publishers.

In terms of the framework proposed in this dissertation, this mode of control amounts to an artificial concentration and expropriation of key distributional capacities, though not distributional capacity *in toto*. However, given the nature of the economic constraints facing book publishers, and the political threats facing the state, each side is disposed to taking greater risks than their counterparts in the film ecology: book publishers are more likely to take a chance and publish a politically sensitive novel, and the state is willing to allow some slippage in that regard. The result is a regime of control that is far less complete than that of the film ecology.

### *Artificial Concentration of Publishing Capacity*

Prior to 2013, all print-related industries—book, newspaper, and periodical publishing, printing, and retail—were regulated by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP). However, in July of 2013, GAPP was merged with the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) to form the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). SAPPRFT is technically subordinate to the State Council, the highest institution in the Chinese state, but is in practice under direct guidance from the Publicity Department<sup>6</sup> (*xuānchuán bù* 宣传部) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP PD) (Li 2013). In the field of book publications, including publishing, printing, distribution, and retail, SAPPRFT is responsible for formulating the principles and policies aimed at guiding public opinion; drafting the laws and regulations that manage the book publication industries; investigating and prosecuting violations of these laws and regulations; devising and implementing industry

<sup>6</sup> Formerly named the Propaganda Department. In recognition of the fact that “propaganda” has a negative connotation in the West, the English rendering of *xuānchuán bù* (宣传部) was changed from “Propaganda Department” to “Publicity Department” in 1998. The name remains the same in Chinese.

development plans; implementing licensing systems; and managing copyrights (State Council 2013). In short, SAPPRFT has the authority to determine which organizations can legally publish books, to decide which content is permissible to publish in books, and to censor those books, organizations, and authors deemed to have violated its principles of "public opinion guidance" (ibid.).

Notwithstanding this new consolidated framework, many of the standing laws and regulations governing the activities of the traditional media industries under study are those originally promulgated by GAPP or by SARFT. The most important document regulating the activities of the book publications industries is the "Publishing Management Regulations" (PMR). The PMR begin by stipulating the fundamental principles meant to guide actors engaged in publications activities. In short, the publishing, printing, reproduction, import, or distribution of print or electronic publications "must persist in serving the people and serving Socialism...raising the nation's quality and benefiting economic development and social progress..." (PMR, Article 3). Although publications activities may serve individual needs, such as financial or intellectual enrichment, the more fundamental aim of such activity must be to serve "the social interest" (PMR, Article 4). Therefore, although individual rights of free expression are guaranteed in China's Constitution<sup>7</sup> as well as in the PMR,<sup>8</sup> they are subordinated to the more fundamental duty to serve the social interest.

The implications of such a demand are made evident by the number of kinds of content that are explicitly proscribed by the PMR. According to Article 25, for example, no publication may contain the following:

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<sup>7</sup> Article 35

<sup>8</sup> Article 5

1. content violating the basic provisions determined in the Constitution;
2. content endangering national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity;
3. content divulging State secrets, endangering national security or harming the national reputation and interest;
4. content inciting ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, destroying ethnic unity, or harming ethnic customs and habits;
5. content propagating heresy or superstition;
6. content disrupting social order, destroying social stability;
7. content propagating obscenity, gambling, violence or abetting crime;
8. content insulting or slandering other persons, damaging other persons' lawful rights and interests;
9. content endangering social morals or excellent ethnic cultural traditions; and
10. other content prohibited by laws, administrative regulations and State provisions.

Thus, the PMR elaborate a rather broad set of conditions that may be used to justify state intervention into the book ecology for the purposes of controlling content. However, as I will argue below, when exercised by the state directly, such control is almost uniformly retroactive. That is, the state is not, as it is in the film ecology, involved directly in pre-screening the content of books for violations of the PMR. That task is delegated, in the first instance, to the organization of the publisher.

On an administrative level, the PMR articulate the manner by which an organization may legally acquire the right to publish books or any other type of publication in China. All publications in China must be published by a registered publishing work unit (*chuban danwei*) and managing access to permits is one of the primary forms of direct control that the party-state exercises over the various publications industries. In order to apply for a permit, an organization must possess, among other things, a fixed work premises and 300,000 yuan (about \$48,000) in registered capital. This financial barrier alone is enough to exclude the majority of the Chinese

population from participating in the publishing industry. However, it is another requirement that constitutes both a greater barrier to participation and a more fundamental mechanism of control.

In order to register as a publishing work unit, an organization must first acquire a state-sanctioned "sponsoring unit" (*zhuban danwei*), i.e., an approved party or government institution ultimately responsible for the activities of the publishing unit (PMR, Article 11; Interim Provisions, Article 5). The sponsoring unit must itself be associated with a "managing department" (*zhuguan bumen*) of equal or greater administrative rank, and it is via this department that a publishing unit makes its formal application for a publishing permit (Stockmann 2014: 52, fn. 4). Often, the sponsoring unit and the managing department are one and the same. However, according to the *Interim Provisions on the Functions of the Sponsoring Unit and the Managing Unit for Publishing Units* (1993), the relationship between the sponsoring/managing institution and the publishing unit is not simply a formal or professional one, but rather one of leadership and guidance. That is, the sponsor has an obligation to play an active part in assuring that publishing units are serving the interests of socialism and the social interest. The effect of the sponsoring/managing institutional relationship is that all legal publishing organizations in China are state-sponsored, if not wholly state-owned. It is via this system of registration—as much a political as an administrative or economic barrier to entry—that the state has been able to artificially control the diffusion of actors with access to publishing capacity and effectively cap the number of publishers in China at 548.

In contrast, although other actors involved in the production and distribution of publications are also required to register their organizations with the state, the barriers to entry are primarily economic and administrative as opposed to political. This is made evident by the requirements for establishing a wholesale or retail publications distribution enterprise. According

to the *Publications Market Management Regulations* (GAPP 2011), organizations interested in establishing publications distribution enterprises must demonstrate registered capital of 20 million yuan (\$3.2 m) or 5 million yuan (\$806,000) for general distribution or wholesale distribution enterprises, respectively. However, distribution enterprises are not required to be sponsored by any party or state institutions to operate. They therefore face far greater state-imposed financial barriers to entry than publishers, while facing relatively few political barriers. In further contrast, book retailers (i.e., book stores) have neither the financial nor the political hurdles imposed upon publishers and wholesale distribution enterprises. The disparity in the numbers of book publishers vis-a-vis other industry participants, such as printers and retailers (Table 5), suggests that political constraints are a crucial additional explanation of the relative concentration of actors in the publishing industry vis-a-vis other sectors of the book publications ecology.

**Table 4.5. Enterprises and Establishments per Media Sub-Industry, 2013**

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Enterprises</i>	<i>Establishments</i>
<i>Publishing</i>	548	581
<i>Printing</i>	1,528	2,566
<i>Retail</i>	5,037	13,843

Source: IBISWorld 2014

The requirement of publishers to receive official permits goes a long way in explaining why the number of publishers has remained relatively constant and concentrated at around 550 publishers for several years. Through its ability to regulate access to publishing permits, the Chinese state artificially controls the concentration of legally sanctioned book publishers. However, despite this political barrier, there exists in China an unknown, but significant number of small-scale,



publishers that operate without state-sponsors and, thus, without permits. These so-called "second channel" publishers—estimated to number between five and thirty thousand—are, strictly speaking, illegal (Ha 2008; Kong 2005: 65; Berg 2010: 327). Nevertheless, they provide essential services, such as discovering new talent, that state-sanctioned publishers have been either unable or unwilling to perform.

What the PMR obscures is that many publishers did not begin as private enterprises seeking and applying for state sanction. On the contrary, most publishers were formerly government departments that were simply commercialized during China's reform period. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, after its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China's cultural sector underwent significant reforms. These reforms included varying degrees of privatization of its publishing institutions and their gradual exposure to market dynamics. Over the course of eight years, beginning in 2003, China's publishing houses were transformed from public institutions into commercial enterprises that would succeed or fail on the basis of profitability (BIZ Beijing 2014). Whereas in the past, book publishers could focus exclusively on publishing books of "moral" or "propagandistic" value, they must now concern themselves with the bottom line, i.e., with publishing books that are likely to be popular with consumers (Sebag-Montefiore 2012). The market has, therefore, presented book publishers with qualitatively new pressures—balancing political correctness with commercial profitability.

The emergence of second-channel publishers reflects the difficulty that many state-sanctioned publishers have made transitioning from exclusively public institutions to commercial enterprises. The state's attempt to artificially concentrate the number of publishers has allowed it to centrally, if indirectly, influence the publishing industry. But the demands of a burgeoning consumer class are not easily met through such a centralized publishing system. In the next

section, I will demonstrate how the pressures of commercialization interact with official publishers' roles as the exclusive channels through which book authors can reach broad audiences in China and abroad, and shape the nature of state control over the book ecology. In practice, although the official publishing system is quite centralized, the complete system is rather more diffuse, and official publishers rely on second channel publishers to perform tasks that they, for either political or administrative reasons, cannot. What this amounts to is a push and pull system of limited risk shared by official and second-channel publishers, as well as the state.

### *Expropriation of Distributive Capacity*

The second means by which the state exercises control over the book publications ecology is via the expropriation of the capacity to distribute International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs). ISBNs are the 10- or 13-digit unique numbers that help other actors in the book ecology to identify a particular title or edition and, in turn, market, sell, and catalogue the product more efficiently. The ISBN system is voluntary, but without an ISBN, a book is unlikely to be catalogued by libraries, bookstores, or online distributors, such as Amazon.com, and, thus, has little chance to reach a wide audience, much less any audience outside of China. Thus, from the standpoint of an individual author wanting to promote her book, or from that of a state wanting to advance its national culture, participation in this system is imperative.

In each country, a single agency is assigned responsibility for issuing ISBNs and, in China, this authority is monopolized by the state. This need not be the case, of course. In the United States, for example, the authority to distribute ISBNs is monopolized by a private

enterprise, Bowker, a subsidiary of ProQuest. In contrast, since China began participating in the ISBN system in 1982, its national ISBN allocating agency, the China ISBN Center (CIC), has been under the authority of GAPP, and is now under that of SAPPRFT. In terms of the framework employed here, then, the state exercises direct and centralized control over a key distributional capacity: the ultimate authority to distribute ISBNs is expropriated from the private sphere and centralized in the CIC, a state-operated agency.

In practice, however, the distribution of ISBNs is not so centralized. Unlike in the film ecology, where hundreds of films may be authored in a single year, in the book ecology *hundreds of thousands* of books are authored each year. Thus, for reasons of administrative practicality, the CIC cannot act as a screening conduit through which all book manuscripts must pass as the China Film Bureau can for finished films. Instead, in China, the authority to distribute ISBNs is delegated to the “official” publishers described above. Though the state owns controlling shares in 60% of the industry's companies, these publishing organizations are not necessarily state-owned. Thus, although the ultimate authority over ISBN allocation is expropriated by the state, in practice, this capacity is employed indirectly via state-sanctioned proxies.

Furthermore, these proxies have the dual, and potentially conflicting, obligations to publish books that both serve the social interest and earn revenue. In this context, taking limited political risks may be worthwhile to a publisher, especially if the result is a best seller (Hua 2013). But a controversial book is only profitable as long as it is on the shelves. If, however,

the Propaganda Department decides to ban a book, it simply orders the publisher to stop shipping it and to destroy its printing plates. This robs the publisher of the capital already invested in the book, and the economic loss alone is enough to deter most publishers from bringing out an “offensive” book again (Ha 2008).

If a publishing organization is found to have transgressed too many boundaries—published too many books that have violated the PMR's content restrictions—it may lose its license and, in effect, its authority to distribute ISBNs. In other words, the economic incentives to publish a controversial work—increased revenue—have to be balanced against the economic incentives *not* to publish a controversial work—sanctions imposed by the state. Each is, ultimately, essential to a publisher's survival.

But an element of risk is built into the very model of production for book publishers. In the film ecology, the state's ability to directly and centrally control distribution via the China Film Bureau promotes a significant amount of conservatism on the part of heavily financed film producers who rely on the small window of the box office release to make returns on their investment. Notwithstanding the economic constraints placed on book publishers by the threat of censorship, book publication is not characterized by such a blockbuster market, and books do not need to have immediate and unambiguous nationwide success in order to be considered worthy of publication. Indeed, publishers often make their names by appealing to niche audiences, and authors are often given contracts based on what an editor thinks the author's long-term potential is over the course of more than one book. The threshold for success in book publishing is, therefore, much lower than in film production, and taking risks is, in a sense, built into the book publishing model. The Chinese book editor thus tends not to be as conservative as the Chinese film producer. Peter Hessler, an American author of three books on China, described the censorship performed by his Chinese editor as "defensive."

Rather than promoting an agenda or covering up some specific truth, he tries to avoid catching the eye of a higher authority. In fact, his goal—to have a book translated and

published as accurately as possible—may run counter to the goals of the Party. The result is a strangely unenthusiastic form of censorship (Hessler 2015).

Unlike in the film industry, there is no direct and centralized state-controlled screening process. In the book ecology, the state delegates the authority to control distribution, via the allocation of ISBNs, to a semi-autonomous and semi-private cohort of book publishers who are also restricted by the demands of the market. Indeed, this small group of state-sanctioned publishers has proven incapable of handling the burden of discovering and developing new literary talent, and have themselves delegated a significant amount of such responsibility to the unsanctioned private market referred to as "the second channel."

Without permits, not only do second channel publishers lack legal status as publishing work units, but they also lack access to ISBNs. ISBNs, which are provided to official state-sanctioned publishers at no cost, can in turn be sold to second channel publishers for pure profit (Zhao 2008). The second channel publishers, for their part, do much of the heavy-lifting involved in locating and vetting new authors and titles and can profit handsomely if they discover a new best-seller. By one estimate, 80% of best-selling books were published and promoted by second channel publishers (Zhao 2008). Furthermore, second-channel publishers specialize in the kinds of works most likely to be subject to politicization: literary, art, and culture publications (ibid.)

The risk, of course, for both the state-sanctioned publisher and the second channel publisher, is that a book is published that is found to violate the content restrictions of the PMR. Such violations come with heavy penalties, including fines, forfeiture of publishing licenses, or even criminal prosecution, depending on the nature of the violation. But given the demands of market competition, publishers do their best to push the boundaries of what is acceptable,

publishable, and profitable. The result is a risk for the state as well—there is a chance that a politically “sensitive” book will see its way to the market. However, this chance has to be weighed against the administrative cost of prescreening 250,000 new titles each year in addition to the likelihood that any single book is going to achieve widespread distribution—and consumption—before the state can order it to be removed from the shelves of bookstores. The nature of book consumption, then—limited to the most literate and done over long periods of time—affords the state the luxury of taking a “wait-and-see” approach to book publications, relying on retroactive rather than preemptive forms of censorship. As will be seen in the chapter on social media, such a “wait-and-see” approach to control has been adapted to the digital context where private, diffuse, and autonomous production have been pushed to their limits.

In short, control over the book publications ecology is not nearly as complete as control over the film ecology, but nor does it need to be. By controlling the number of publishing outfits, and delegating the authority to allocate ISBNs only to state-sanctioned publishers, the state artificially manufactures concentrations of social capacity as well as dependencies, rendering an otherwise autonomous author base dependent on state sanction for widespread distribution. Such sanction is not, however, managed directly by the state, but rather indirectly through a centralized group of publishers to whom authority has been delegated. Insofar as state-sanctioned publishers control access to ISBNs, they effectively control access to book markets, and even if an author intended to forego the multiple other services that publishers provide, he or she might still need to work with a publisher in order to achieve the widest distribution in traditional printed book markets. The locus of control in the book publications ecology is, therefore, in the organization of the book publisher and, most directly, in the person of the book editor (Ash 2015; Hessler 2015; Olesen 2015: 4). Over time, editors, and authors themselves, attempt to learn what

is and is not permissible and to become adept at treading the fine line of political controversy. In Peter Hessler's first Chinese edition, for example, his editor removed five out of four hundred pages; his second book, two pages; and his third book only twenty sentences (Hessler 2015).

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHINESE TELEVISION ECOLOGY

Television is China's most ubiquitous and, from the perspectives of both the public and the state, most indispensable mass medium. From the public's perspective, television is immanently accessible: there are few economic barriers, such as cost, and even fewer social barriers, such as education, preventing widespread consumption of televised content. Television offers consumers an increasingly diverse menu of content that audiences may consume at their leisure. And for a state with an interest in managing political speech, the opportunity presented by daily access to two billion eyes and ears rivals the threat borne by the potential broadcast of subversive content.

The television ecology, therefore, offers a critical vantage point onto the dilemma of state power. In an era when content was broadcast over only a few channels, such capacity might reasonably be expropriated from the private sphere and monopolized at the state center. However, in an era when a burgeoning middle class expects dozens, if not hundreds, of channels to choose from, the capacity of the state to single-handedly produce and distribute diverse and quality programming—while also drawing viewers to programs that the state deems essential—has proven to be beyond reach.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that as within other information ecologies, modes of state control over televised speech reflect the distinctive features of the Chinese television ecology. Much of the literature on media and politics focuses on how the cost of technology affects the concentration or diffusion of access to technology. In contrast, I will show that although concentrations of the capacity to produce and distribute televised content have ebbed and flowed in recent decades, in the Chinese context, these changes better reflect political and administrative constraints than economic or technological ones.



On the other hand, the concentration or diffusion of social capacity is not the only dimension of control relevant to the dilemma of state power. Like film, the production of televised content is a coordinated and costly process that lends itself to significant dependencies which can be exploited in service of preemptive forms of control. This, it will be shown, has enabled the state to allow the private production of certain types of content, while jealously guarding the production of other types. Indeed, the production of content in the television ecology, as well as state strategies to exercise control over it, proceed along more than one track. On the one hand, the production of television entertainment programs is conducted largely by private-sphere actors and, on the other hand, the production of news content is a capacity that remains exclusively in the hands of the state.

I begin this chapter by elaborating the distinctive features of the Chinese television ecology, which include the ubiquity of consumptive capacity and the concentration of productive and distributive capacity in the organization of the television station. Following this, I trace the recent development of the television industry in order to identify the dominant modes of state control over this medium, and how they have evolved to reflect the current political, administrative, social, and economic constraints of modern China. The chapter focuses primarily on modes of control over entertainment programming on television, treating news programming, for now, as a residual category. In other words, the discussion in this chapter is about reforms that *have* been implemented in relation to entertainment television and, by implication, *have not* been implemented in relation to news programming. News programming will be analyzed explicitly in chapter six, a comparison of news production in print (newspapers) and television.

## The Information Ecology of Television

Television shares similarities with more than one other information ecology. Like film, television is a medium through which audiences enjoy audio-visual forms of entertainment and for which there are few educational barriers to consumption. Like newspapers, television is a medium through which audiences tend to consume information on a daily basis. And like both books and newspapers, television in the 21st century is sufficiently inexpensive to allow for widespread consumption in China. These features combine to make television the most ubiquitous medium in China, playing each day—all day—to the world's largest consumer market. In what follows, I elaborate these distinctive features of the Chinese television ecology: the ubiquity of consumptive capacity and the concentration of productive and distributive capacity in the organization of the television station.

### *The Television Audience*

Television arrived to China in May 1958 when Beijing Television Station, the predecessor to China Central Television (CCTV), went to air for the first time (Sukosd and Wang 2013). It then took more than 30 years before television would become the dominant medium in China. In 1978, on the eve of China's reform period, only 10 million people out of a total population of 963 million had access to television, and there were fewer than one television set for every hundred people in China. By 1996, that number had increased to one television set for every four people and coverage—the number of people who can access a television broadcast—had increased to 1 billion (Zhu and Berry 2009, p. 3; NBS 2013). China's coverage rate reached 90% for the first

time in 1999 and by the First Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee at the end of 2012, it stood at 98.2%, making it the most ubiquitous medium in China<sup>9</sup> (NBS 2000; 2013). Indeed, at 1.33 billion people, the Chinese TV audience is the largest in the world.

In 2009, Chinese media scholars Ying Zhu and Chris Berry argued that television had replaced literature and film, the emblematic media of the Maoist era, as “the medium of marketized China” (Zhu and Berry 2009, p. 1). Far more people watch television each day in China than read a novel or go to see a movie, and television is the primary source of news and entertainment for most Chinese media consumers. “Indeed,” the authors argue, “if they are consuming literature and film, they are likely to be doing so via television, watching film channels and dramatic series adapted from literature” (ibid., p. 4).

As each year passes, however, more Chinese citizens gain regular access to the Internet, either through personal computers or through mobile phones and, in 2015, the average Chinese citizen spent more time online than they did watching television; 2012 was perhaps a crossover year for this trend. In 2012, for example, the average Chinese citizen spent 164 minutes (2.73 hours) watching television and 176 minutes (2.93 hours) online, making it the first year on record that Chinese citizens spent more time online than watching TV (Ofcom 2013, p. 133; CNNIC 2013, p. 29). But these statistics do not tell the entire story. Chinese citizens spend a significant amount of their time online watching programs that were produced for television—in particular, television dramas. In 2012, 75% of Chinese Internet users watched TV content online at least once a week, more than double the proportion of users from the United Kingdom (36%) and nearly three times that of users in the United States (28%) (Ofcom 2013, p. 65). Thus, even when online, Chinese citizens are consuming a healthy dose of televised content. In terms of

<sup>9</sup> As a point of comparison, the coverage rates for radio and the Internet in 2012 were 97.5% and 39.9%, respectively (NBS 2013).

content consumption, then, although the Internet was clearly the heir apparent, at the end of 2012, television still reigned.

Not only do Chinese citizens have greater access to television than to any other medium, but they have increasingly broad access to television stations and channels from across China and even from abroad. As recently as the early 1990s, most Chinese TV viewers could only access the national television network, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and its associated channels, as well as whatever local channels were available in their province or municipality. However, between 1989 and 1999, provincial television stations began to join a national satellite broadcasting system which has enabled them, on the one hand, to distribute their own content to other regional markets and, on the other, to provide local cable TV subscribers access to channels that originate in other provinces (Zhang 2009, p. 174). Local cable providers could receive these regional broadcasts through satellite and distribute them to cable subscribers via wired channels. By 2012, 51.5% of households (215 million) had subscribed to cable television, enabling them to consume programming beyond what was offered by either national or local broadcasters (NBS 2013).

All of the above suggests that television has, in fact, become *the* medium of modern China. "The television set is a one-time investment and viewing is free<sup>10</sup>, which fits well with the consumption pattern and power of ordinary Chinese ..." (Zhang 2009, p. 172). Television is accessible, can be consumed in the privacy of one's home and, increasingly, affords consumers a degree of autonomy over their choices of content, diminishing—though not eliminating—the utility of television as a tool of propaganda. The average Chinese consumer has more than 60

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<sup>10</sup> Viewing over-the-air (OTA) broadcasts is free. Cable TV subscriptions, of course, cost money.

channels to choose from, and with the development of digital television this number is expected to increase (Hang 2013, p. 419). Paradoxically, then,

the intrusion of propaganda into the homes of television viewers was not as successful as the government had envisaged [when television first arrived to China]. ... An increase in the number of channels, along with the technology of the remote control, meant that people could simply switch off (Donald and Keane 2002, p. 13).

Notwithstanding the autonomy afforded by consumer choice, the time that the average Chinese viewer spends with television daily makes it an indispensable medium from the perspective of a state seeking to manage speech and, indeed, political thought. During the first ten years of the new millennium, the typical Chinese TV viewer spent between 130 and 170 minutes each day with the television and “the number of hours increases steadily with age [as those aged 45 and above watch an average of 4 hours per day” (ITC 2011, p. 29).

It should come as no surprise then that the CCP expends significant amounts of political and administrative energy to maintain control over television content even as, it will be shown, it decentralizes certain aspects of the productive process and allows private capital and foreign corporations to enter into the industry. The primary way by which such control is effected is via the expropriation of the organizations most centrally involved in the production and distribution of televised content: TV stations. In the following section, I elaborate the nature of the production and distribution of televised information goods, focusing primarily on the economic factors that affect the distribution of informatic capacity throughout the television ecology, especially as mediated through the institution of the TV station.

*Television Stations*

Television (TV) stations are the most central actors in the television ecology. It is only within the last 20 years that non TV-station actors have been involved in the production of televised programs, but they do so only at the behest of a TV station, and production is limited to non-news programs. Notwithstanding recent innovations in Internet Protocol TV (IPTV), the distribution of television programs is also still handled almost exclusively by TV stations, reflecting the fact that they are the operators of both broadcast transmitters and cable TV networks. Thus, in China, in one way or another, TV production and distribution are inextricably bound to TV stations.

Television stations perform several different functions in the TV ecology, not least of which is the distribution of information goods—TV programs—to a mass viewing audience. However, unlike the media analyzed thus far, the distribution of information goods within the TV ecology does not actually involve the transport of a physical good. Books, newspapers, DVDs, even the films shown at movie theaters, must all be physically transferred from their point of manufacture to wholesalers, retailers, or exhibition venues and then, ultimately, to consumers. This is, of course, not so with a television program. In their origin, television programs were broadcast exclusively over radio waves from a transmitting station to one of several receiving apparatuses. A television set equipped with an antenna could receive a signal directly from a transmitting station. Alternatively, a building equipped with a rooftop antenna could receive a signal and distribute the signal by wire to one or multiple television sets on the premises in what is called a master access television (MATV) network. And a national broadcasting system could be established via networks of microwave relay stations that would

receive, amplify, and re-transmit signals to other stations that could, in turn, broadcast signals to the set tops of viewing audiences (Parsons 2008).

These types of systems are referred to as terrestrial or over-the-air (OTA) broadcasts, and worked well for those consumers whose homes were in a reasonably direct line-of-sight from a broadcasting station. In contrast, audiences in remote locations could often not receive reliable OTA broadcasts. In 1948, however, a rudimentary technological workaround to these reception problems was developed in the US that would change this. Communities living in the mountainous areas of Pennsylvania installed large antennae at the top of an elevated location, from which a direct line-of-sight was available, and ran cables from the antennae to their homes. Thus was born Community Antenna Television (CATV) or, as it is commonly called today, cable TV (Parsons 2008).

Cable TV networks were introduced in China in the 1970s. Many work units had already been wired to act as loudspeaker networks, and these were repurposed to distribute OTA signals as MATV networks beginning in 1974 (Harrison 2002, p. 168). These early cable networks were designed for the sole purpose of relaying OTA broadcasts from Beijing Television (the precursor to CCTV) and provincial TV broadcasts as they became available. The effect of cable access on television consumption was significant: cable access extended the reach of TV to audiences into rural areas, contributed greatly to the wide coverage that exists in China today.

In addition to their roles in distribution, TV stations are also centrally positioned in the production of information goods. Indeed, prior to the mid-1990s, TV stations had the exclusive legal authority to produce television programs. And although it has since become legal for TV stations to outsource the production of entertainment programs to private companies, the production of TV news content remains the exclusive domain of TV stations. Though the reasons

for the concentration of productive capacity in TV stations are, in important ways, political and administrative, and will therefore be dealt with more fully in the next section, there are certainly economic reasons for concentration as well.

Like film, television is an audio-visual medium and, as such, production requires significant capital inputs as well as skilled labor and talent. All forms of TV production require video and audio recording equipment, lighting equipment, post-production editing equipment, and materials to fabricate sets. Moreover, each of these will require skilled labor to operate, as well as designers, wardrobe and make-up artists, and other staff. Whether news or entertainment, each program will also need a director to coordinate these creative roles as well as a staff of administrators to coordinate the roles of these and other, non-creative support staff personnel. Entertainment television, including TV dramas or series, will also require script writers and professional actors. According to Jiazhuo Wang and Juan Yang (2013), China produces approximately 14,000 episodes of TV series domestically every year, requiring, at least, 14,000 different scripts. Insofar as the success of a TV program depends on the quality of its scripts and on its acting, it depends a great deal on skilled labor for which there is a premium attached to expertise. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, labor represents a relatively high cost in the TV industry (IBISWorld 2014).

**Table 5.1. Labor Costs as Percent of Revenue, 2013**

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Wages</i>	<i>Total Labor<sup>11</sup></i>
<i>TV Broadcast</i>	<b>22%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<i>Newspapers</i>	15%	15%
<i>Film Production</i>	8%	13%
<i>Book Publishing</i>	3%	17%

(IBISWorld 2014)

<sup>11</sup> Includes other labor costs such as, for example, administration and royalties paid to authors.



News programs require their own forms of skilled labor and talent as well, namely, journalists and TV anchors. However, as will be shown below and in chapter six, the production of television dramas and television news is increasingly segmented, the former being outsourced to the private sector and the latter remaining an in-house enterprise. Indeed, as I will elaborate in greater detail in the next chapter, news anchors and journalists are technically state bureaucrats and, as such, are paid according to their rank and not according to their status as celebrity or expert.

In contrast to the film industry, however, production and distribution tend to be consolidated in a single organization, that of the television station. Because of this, the transmission of content represents a significant cost for television stations. Transmitting equipment are particularly costly inputs, due to large coverage areas, high transmission standards and technological turnover (IBISWorld 2014). Therefore, notwithstanding steep labor costs, the level of capital intensity is still relatively high in the TV industry. IBISWorld estimates that the ratio of capital (depreciation) to labor (wages and management) expenditures is about \$0.43. By comparison, capital intensity in the film, book publishing, and newspaper publishing industries are \$0.96, \$0.15, and \$0.34, respectively. And whereas the share of revenue spent to replace capital (depreciation) in the book and newspaper publishing industries was 2.5% and 5%, respectively, the share in both the film production and television broadcast industries were each 12% (Table 2).

**Table 5.2. Capital and Labor Costs as Percent of Revenue, 2013**

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Capital Intensity</i>	<i>Depreciation/ Revenue</i>	<i>Labor/ Revenue</i>	<i>Capital and Labor/ Revenue</i>
<i>TV Broadcast</i>	\$0.43	<b>12%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<i>Film Production</i>	\$0.96	12%	13%	25%
<i>Newspapers</i>	\$0.34	5%	15%	20%
<i>Book Publishing</i>	\$0.15	3%	17%	20%

(IBISWorld 2014)

In short, TV stations have significant economic inputs, especially relative to print media. A strictly economic theory of media might anticipate that such capital intensive factors of production would yield dense concentrations of television stations. But the reality is not so clear cut. According to official statistics, in 2013 there were 166 national- or provincial-level and 2,207 sub-provincial television stations in China (NBS 2014). When compared to the 16,448 newspaper enterprises in China, TV stations seem rather densely concentrated, but when compared to the number of film studios (848) or book publishers (548), they seem rather diffuse (IBISWorld 2014).

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, factors of production such as capital inputs may explain why social capacity tends to be concentrated in large organizations rather than individuals, but outside the context of a perfectly free market, they are incapable of explaining the relative concentration or diffusion of such industrial actors. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that such variation better reflects political and administrative constraints than it does economic or technological ones. Indeed, as state-owned institutions, the ebb and flow of the concentration of television stations in China is primarily the result of direct state intervention. Moreover, although there are more than 2,000 stations with the technical capacity to broadcast

media content, this capacity has been subject to both administrative and political movements of decentralization and recentralization. Thus, in order to account better for modes of control in the television ecology, the ecological perspective proposed here will take each of these constraints into account.

### **Control**

During the Maoist Period in China (1949 - 1976), the complete expropriation of media capacity from the private sphere may have resolved—or precluded the emergence of—a dilemma of state power in relation to the television ecology. Since the reform period, however, several changes have compelled the Party to reckon with such a dilemma. Below, I argue that fiscal reforms since the 1980s began a series of events, the results of which have been an ebb and flow of administrative decentralization and recentralization within the television ecology, as well as a bifurcated system of control over specific types of content. Specifically, a distinction is made between entertainment and news programs. The former is subject to increasingly decentralized and privatized, but dependent forms of production, and the latter remains a relatively centralized and expropriated capacity. In short, these changes, and the resultant systems of control, reflect, not simply a reevaluation of the Party's administration of the television industry, but also an evolution in its view of the role of media in the context of comprehensive reforms to the Chinese economy.

*News v. Entertainment*

In terms of content, television programs may be divided into two broad categories: entertainment programs and news programs. Although it may be objected that some news programs have entertainment value or that some non-news (such as education) programs, are not, strictly speaking, entertainment, this categorization may nonetheless be justified for two reasons. First, it captures a distinction identified in the literature on TV viewer preferences, within which "the simplest models distinguish between preferences for information and entertainment" (Prior 2005, p. 578). Second, and perhaps more importantly, there are distinct legal and regulatory restrictions guiding entertainment and news production in China. To wit, entertainment programs may be produced by private (non-state) actors and news programs may not. In the first case, viewers recognize a difference between entertainment and news programs; in the second case, the state does.

Such a distinction did not always exist within the Chinese television industry. On the one hand, the role of media organizations during the Maoist period (1949 - 1976) was not only explicitly, but exclusively propagandistic. The line between entertainment and news was thus blurred in practice. The primary role of media was to act as the Party's—and, thereby, also the people's—"mouthpiece," and to guide, not only public opinion, but also public morality as such (He 2008, p. 40; Zhao 1998, p. 19). There was, therefore, no such thing as what one might call "entertainment for entertainment's sake." Public broadcasts, whether news or otherwise, had to have political, ideological, and moral purpose.

On the other hand, there was no legal or, from the Party's perspective, legitimate separation between the power to produce and the power to distribute televised information. TV

stations were at once the producers and the broadcasters (i.e., the distributors) of television content. A division of labor such as exists in the United States, where production companies produce TV shows and sell them to TV stations, which, in turn, broadcast them to viewing audiences, was neither necessary nor desirable. Media were, by definition, the property of the state and, in service of their role as the Party's mouthpiece, quite passive. If a new program was deemed necessary, media officials would be informed by the appropriate authorities, and then set out to produce it using resources apportioned to them for such purposes. Furthermore, most Chinese families did not own their own television sets, nor were there, prior to the introduction of satellite technology, many viewing choices available to them—a national broadcasting network in CCTV and a station assigned to each province-level of administration. The consolidation of production and broadcasting capacities in the organization of television stations, therefore, served the purposes of the pre-reform party-state well: a centralized and state-owned network of television stations monopolized the capacity to produce content and to distribute it to a limited but captive audience.

There has been no official change to the media's role as the Party's mouthpiece. Indeed, in 1994, this role was reemphasized in a speech given by Party Secretary, Zhang Zemin, and then codified in a resolution at the Sixth Plenary Session of the CCP's Sixteenth Central Committee in 1996 (Hong, et al. 2009, p. 48). In reality, however, such proclamations betrayed the fact that by the mid-1990s, the role of the media was not *only* to serve as the Party's mouthpiece, even if that were to remain its primary role. Indeed, by the early 1980s, a series of reforms had been set in motion that would fundamentally alter the responsibilities of media organizations. In short, the transfer of fiscal responsibility from the state center to media institutions themselves resulted in a

situation where media organizations had to serve “two masters with two bottom lines”: the Party *and* advertisers (Winfield and Peng 2005, p. 261).

These reforms have impacted each dimension of the control trilogy: the authority over, access to, and the autonomy with which media capacities can be employed. However, as will be shown in this chapter and the next, although the Party’s perspective on role of entertainment media is evolving to accommodate competing economic, political, and social interests, it continues to jealously guard its position as the sole authority over *news* media. The result of what may be called the politicization of content has been, in the television ecology, a bifurcation of modes of control, with different rules applying to entertainment and news programs.

### *TV Entertainment*

All TV stations in China are categorized as state-owned enterprises (*qǐyè dānwèi* 企业单位), and as state work units (*dānwèi* 单位), each TV station is assigned an administrative rank in accordance with the level of state responsible for their management. However, although technically owned by the state, TV stations may still raise profits and even receive limited investment from the private sphere.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, TV stations are quite profitable, generating more revenue in taxes for the central government than they receive from it, and collecting the majority of nationwide spending on advertising (Zhu and Berry 2009, p. 1). This, however, has not always been the case and is both a source and a manifestation of the dilemma of state power in modern China.

<sup>12</sup> The state must own controlling shares.

Upon completion of the socialist transition in 1956 until well into the reform period, all media organizations in China were categorized as *shìyè dānwèi* (事业 单位), or public service (i.e., non-production, non-profit) state units (Sukosd and Wang 2015, p. 89). As public service organizations, *shìyè dānwèi* relied exclusively on budgetary allocations from the central government for operational expenses and remitted any surpluses back to the state center (Sukosd and Wang 2015, p. 89). Furthermore, as a result of the "party manages the cadre" principle (*dǎngguǎn gàn bù* 党管干部)—commonly referred to as the *nomenklatura* system—the CCP had the authority to appoint or dismiss any of a media organization's key personnel (Sukosd and Wang 2015, p. 89; Zheng 2007, p. 12). Per Hong Junhao, Lü Yanmei, and William Zou:

Almost all the officials at all levels in television stations were appointed by the relevant party organizations. Media professionals were treated as mere operatives. They were not given authority to decide what to produce and how to produce it, but were just told by their party-appointed supervisors to produce what the party needed, in the way the party wanted (Hong, et al. 2009, p. 43).

In this context, a TV manager's only real priority was to follow central government directives. In terms of programming, this meant toeing the party line—there was no need to accommodate the preferences of viewing audiences (Xu 2015, p. 374). Early in the reform period, however, this calculus would change significantly.

Prior to 1980, the Chinese state operated what was known as the "unified revenue, unified expenditure" (*tǒngshōu tǒngzhī* 統收統支) system of public finance (Sharma 2009, p. 64). Under this system of intergovernmental revenue sharing, all revenues and expenditures for state institutions were administered by a central bursar. However, in 1980, the central government undertook a new policy, which came to be known as "eating from separate kitchens" (*fēnzào*

*chīfàn* 分灶吃饭) (Sun and Alexander 2012, p. 64). Under this reform, the responsibility for financing local state programs was transferred from the central to local levels of government. Thus, local governments were compelled, for the first time, to find independent sources of revenue. This policy of "eating from separate kitchens" created new incentives for local administrators to facilitate economic production, prompting several new economic initiatives that were, at least in part, responsible for generating China's rapid economic growth during this period (Oi 1999).

But the shift from central to local fiscal responsibility did not come without growing pains. Indeed, the change was something of a shock to state units that had hitherto not had to concern themselves with—and were thus not well-prepared for the task of—raising revenues. Mitigating the sting of the shift in fiscal responsibility were several reforms to the management of public service state units (*shìyè dānwèi*) introduced by the CCP under the rubric of "public service units, corporatized management" (*shìyè dānwèi, qǐyèhuà guǎnlǐ* 事业单位, 企业化管理). According to these reforms, public service institutions would be allowed to adopt certain corporate management practices in order to allow them to become more efficient and more financially self-dependent. Most importantly, these reforms allowed media organizations to earn revenue by selling space to advertisers.

Shortly thereafter, in 1983, the central government implemented a second reform, which was crucial to the development of the TV sector. During the Maoist period (1949 - 1976), Chinese media became increasingly centralized, and broadcast media in particular were concentrated at the national and provincial levels of the state. Indeed, prior to 1983, there were not many more than 50 television stations in all of China: the national broadcaster (CCTV), a TV station in each provincial capital, and an additional station in 24 cities nationwide (Sun and



Alexander 2012: 63). Under the so-called "four-tiered management" (*sìjībàn* 四级办) reform, the central government allowed for—even encouraged—the establishment of television stations at each of the top four administrative levels of the state: central, provincial, prefectural/municipal, and county (Bai 2014: 31). The immediate effect of this policy was a proliferation of television stations at the sub-provincial (city and county) levels, as local government officials jumped at the opportunity to wield their very own "propaganda machines" (Xu 2015: 377). By 1984, the number of television stations had almost doubled to 93, and then increased to 509 by 1990 (Keane and Spurgeon 2004). By 1995, the number had ballooned dramatically to 3,429 (NBS 1996).

Ultimately, however, four-tiered management was complicated by the policy of "eating in separate kitchens." Fervent demand for local television stations was encumbered, if not tempered, by a concomitant need to raise the revenue necessary to operate such capital-intensive enterprises. In the absence of the centralized bursar system, local TV managers turned to the market with enthusiasm, supplanting state subsidies with advertising revenues. Whereas TV advertising revenues stood at 160 million yuan (USD 24.4m) in 1983, they increased tenfold to 1.69 billion yuan (USD 258m) in 1987, and would increase by more than one hundredfold to 195 billion yuan (USD 29.8bn) between 1987 and 2005 (Table 3).

**Table 5.3. Advertising Revenue of Chinese Mass Media (in Billion yuan)**

	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2005
<i>Television</i>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>1.69</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>64.98</b>	<b>156.1</b>	<b>195</b>
<i>Newspapers</i>	0.73	3.55	9.62	64.67	112.3	40
<i>Magazines</i>	0.11	0.45	0.99	3.82	8.9	4.6
<i>Radio</i>	0.18	0.47	1.41	7.37	12.5	4.2
<i>Total</i>	1.18	6.16	22.02	140.84	289.8	262.8

(Rumi 2007, p. 163)

Since the value of any advertising spot increases as the size of the audience increases, the need to attract advertisers created a need to attract viewers, bringing Chinese TV station managers into uncharted territory. Managers would need to appeal to the content preferences of viewing audiences while at the same time accommodating—or at least not opposing—the political interests of the Party. It was a role that few of them, trained as party cadre and not as the producers of entertainment programming, were qualified to perform. Ultimately, however, these creative pressures were attenuated by separate developments, including administrative and regulatory reforms implemented by Beijing with an eye toward the inevitable competition from foreign transnational media organizations that would result after China's entry into the World Trade Organization.

From the beginning of the reform period until 1992, China's tertiary (or service) sector had grown to only 27 percent of GNP, less than half the average of 60 percent in most developed countries (Bell, et al. 1993, p. 30). In response to this gap, in 1992, the central government issued the "Decisions on Expediting the Development of the Tertiary Industry," elaborating a plan to develop China's service sector. To this end, most service sector institutions, including media institutions, were officially re-categorized from purely public service (*shìyè*) institutions into profit-seeking (*qǐyè* 企业) institutions. Legally, TV stations would still be categorized as state

units (*dānwèi* 单位), but they would no longer exist in exclusive service to public edification. TV stations could now legitimately seek to make profit, and what was most profitable—what could attract the most advertising revenue—was entertainment programming.

As suggested above, however, cadre TV managers were not the most attuned to the preferences of viewers and, thus, not best suited to develop programs capable of attracting large viewing audiences. In service of this function, a parallel, if not entirely legal, practice emerged in the mid-1990s whereby TV stations would outsource the production of entertainment television programs—in particular, television dramas—to private production companies. Although in 1995, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (MRFT), the predecessor to SARFT, ruled that "individuals and private-run enterprises" could not establish television production companies, this practice would continue under the radar over the next two years (MRFT 1995). Then, in 1997, under the newly established SARFT's "Regulation of Radio and Television Management," what would come to be known as the "broadcast separation" reform (*zhíbō fēnlí* 直播分离) or, more precisely, the separation of production activity from broadcasting institutions, was given *de jure* recognition as a legitimate practice (Liu 2010, p. 77). TV stations, which had historically managed all aspects of TV programming from production to broadcast-distribution, could now legally outsource the production of specific types of content—to wit, non-news programs—to private production companies, provided that the production companies were formally registered with the state.

Whether these final reforms merely legitimated changes that were already taking place underground is a reasonable question, but perhaps impossible to answer. In any case, one cannot overstate the total effect of the series of reforms undertaken by the state since the beginning of the reform period. By 2012, 60 percent of the capital for TV series production came from

nongovernment sources and more than 5,000 independent production companies were responsible for producing 80 percent of the content of TV dramas, the most popular form of non-news or entertainment program in China (Wang and Yang 2013, pp. 116-7, 119). The result of broadcast separation was, then, a dramatic decentralization and privatization of productive capacity in the television ecology. Despite the decentralization and privatization of productive capacity—or perhaps because of it—the production of entertainment programs remains a highly dependent activity. This dependency is engendered by two mechanisms: on the one hand, by a licensing regime and, on the other, by the fact that independently produced TV programs can only be sold to the state.

Two types of licenses are available to private or "independent" production companies. A "Class A" license functions for two years and allows a company to produce multiple programs within that timeframe; a "Class B" license functions for 180 days and can be used to produce only one program during that time (Bai 2007, p. 89). In order to apply for a license, a production company must submit a proposal to SAPPRT or a local bureau of SAPPRT, including a synopsis of the program to be filmed, after which SAPPRT will approve the program, reject it, suggest revisions, or pass it along to another government agency for further review (Bai 2007, p. 90). As in the film industry, once a program has been completed, it is subject to a final review by SAPPRT. Class A licenses, therefore, afford a producer a significant amount more autonomy in terms of productive capacity since one license will allow a company to produce several films. Consequently, they are given out quite rarely and only to companies that have successfully completed multiple programs that have made their way from production to broadcast. In 2012, for example, while 5,363 Class B licenses were issued, only 130 companies received a Class A license.

The result of the broadcast separation reform, therefore, is not a loosening of control, but rather a redistribution of the locus of control. According to Xu Minghua, the effect is

a transfer of production risks from TV stations to independent TV production companies ... Independent producers have to resort to strict self-censorship since they are uncertain how far they can go [in terms of taking political risks] and would rather self-consciously follow the state's ideological guidelines than incur the risk of having to pay a political penalty (Xu 2012, p. 374-5).

According to one marketing manager from an independent production company:

[The TV stations] don't want to sign a contract with us because they are not sure whether the program can pass the censorship of SARFT ... (As such) we have to put some money into [producing] a sample and give it to them to see how ... you know, we have [to] put a lot of money into preparing these samples, it is not a small amount of money, we need to pay for the studio, the staff, the attended audiences ... TV stations won't invest until they are sure our samples can be accepted by the SARFT...if it can't pass the censorship, the losses have to be incurred by us! Every year, we have spent a lot on this (Xu 2015, p. 371).

In short, the privatization of TV programming was, ultimately, a response to fiscal decentralization, a reform initiated by the state as part of a more encompassing program of reform to China's economy. Thus, what may be seen as an evolving view of the political significance of entertainment programming better reflects a pragmatic evaluation of state interests, of the need to balance competing economic, political, and social goals. Notably, however, such a view has not been adopted in relation to news programming. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, in their role as the mouthpiece of the Party, the news media remain resolutely in the hands of the state.

Thus, control over televised content is manifest as a bifurcated system of administration: a decentralized, privatized, but highly dependent system of entertainment production sits alongside a centralized and state-operated system of news production. In terms of the former, however, the threats perceived by the state have not been limited to actors within the domestic private sector. Indeed, the state's concerns extend outward beyond its borders and inward within the state itself. I take these up in turn below.

### *Political-Administrative Recentralization*

As I have alluded above, in a process similar to what was seen in the film industry, China's accession to the WTO was attended by a perceived threat to its national sovereignty. In particular, the Party feared that its still developing domestic media institutions might struggle in competition with their large and powerful transnational counterparts and, in this instance, that such competition might result in a corruption of the overall political and moral quality of televised programming. Thus, in the late 1990s, SARFT took steps to preempt the competitiveness of foreign media institutions by means of a two-fold strategy: on the one hand, administrative recentralization and, on the other, corporate conglomeration. The effect of these reforms would be to create China's own domestic media giants.

The first component of SARFT's centralizing strategy was known as "broadcast consolidation and reorganization" (BCR), which drastically reduced the number of television stations in China while reforming the administrative status of the remaining television stations. Between 1997 and 1998, the state enforced a dramatic consolidation of the Chinese television

broadcasting industry. In 1997, there were close to 3,000 television stations in China, including 923 over-the-air (OTA) broadcast stations and 2,055 county-level cable TV stations (NBS 1998). Within a single year, however, the number of OTA stations had been reduced to 347 and county-level cable stations to 1,403, a total reduction of 1,228 stations (NBS 1998).

Moreover, according to what is known as "Document no. 82," in 1999, the state reverted the four-tiered network of TV station administration outlined above back to a two-tiered (central and province-level) network of administration. In effect, the authority to decide which content to broadcast was re-appropriated from municipal- and county-level TV stations, the majority of which would be redefined as transmission relay stations for broadcasting stations at the provincial or central levels of the state (Yang 2012, p. 41). Many TV stations that were formerly administered at the county-level were absorbed into provincial-level network corporations, in effect, conglomerates "composed of all local stations and controlled by provincial TV stations" (Xie 2014, p. 92). In addition to eliminating many sub-provincial level television stations, then, the BCR were responsible for recentralizing the remainder. The second centralizing strategy of the BCR was, therefore, a state-led strategy of corporate consolidation.

Although the ostensible justification of the BCR was to enable domestic television institutions to compete with foreign transnationals, Xu Minghua (2012) argues that competition from abroad was not the sole impetus for the recentralizing reforms. Rather, there were political concerns as well. In fact, Xu argues that central party officials were concerned about the increasing political autonomy afforded to lower levels of the state administration by virtue of their ability to control television broadcasts. As I have shown, the policy of "eating from separate kitchens" compelled local TV administrators to weigh financial concerns heavily, especially vis-à-vis political ones. In practice, this led not only to the development of private production in

China, but also to the illegal transmission of foreign satellite signals. Moreover, local authorities began to use TV stations as personal propaganda apparatuses, hiring family members who lacked professional experience to work for them and, at times, even failing to comply with central directives.

Regional officials tend to excessively utilize local TV stations as their personal propaganda tools. They praise their political achievements and magnify their local influence, but rarely fulfill their assignments to deliver central directives ... often illegally transmit foreign satellite TV signals and insert their own advertisements regardless of central regulations (Xu 2012, p. 377).

Thus, argues Xu, the BCR did not result simply from economic factors, such as the ability of large corporations to mobilize the resources necessary capital-intensive industry, thereby pushing smaller stations out of the market. Instead, the BCR were the result of a drive by the center toward political centralization, effected via administrative manipulation. In short, it is

better to regard the BCR as an "administrative consolidation" rather than a market-determined combination. ... it is now easier for the government to exercise its regulatory power on local commercial media workers [who have become] so closely supervised that they now pay more attention to the "political correctness" of their programs (Xu 2012, p. 378).

### Conclusion

In sum, features of the control regime within the Chinese television ecology reflect several qualities of information ecologies generally. First, media ecologies are not monolithic, nor, from the vantage points of both consumers and the state, is content. Modes of control over media may



take qualitatively different forms depending, not simply on the nature of the medium, but also on the nature of the content distributed via a particular medium. In this chapter, I have focused on one half of a bifurcated system of control that distinguishes between entertainment and news programming. In terms of the former, the state has been willing to allow increasingly privatized production of televised media, but as will be shown in chapter six, the production of news media remains an expropriated social capacity that the state guards jealously.

Second, state efforts at recentralization reflect a phenomenon that is often ignored in the literature on new media: the primacy of the political. This is a topic that I will continue to elaborate in the next chapter on news in China, but the importance of politics was revealed in this chapter by the fact that fluctuations in the concentration of TV stations in China were not primarily the result of market dynamics. Rather, the four-tiered management reform and the BCR were explicitly state effects, implemented for both administrative and political reasons. Moreover, the history of China's de- and re-centralizing reforms demonstrates that the state is not itself a monolith. Rather, central and sub-national state actors often have competing interests and, in light of these, information ecologies may pose different opportunities and constraints for controlling agents at various levels of the state. Indeed, as Xu Minghua has argued, from the perspective of the state center, sub-national state officials may be the objects of or obstacles to control. Recentralization, the result of political-administrative factors, allowed the state center to exercise greater control over the Chinese television ecology.

Finally, politics are not static, nor are they divorced from practical concerns. In China, the private production of entertainment television reflects both an evolution in the Party's perspective on the political significance of entertainment, as well as the practical concerns of television stations that have, over recent decades, been forced to rely on the market to raise

revenues. In other words, neither the technologies of media, nor the practices that they enable can alone determine the political effects of media. Instead, these qualities interact with a political context that is necessarily dynamic: political actors have agency and they base their decisions on circumstances that are constantly changing. Notwithstanding the dynamism of the political realm, the ecological perspective of media proposed here suggests that there are certain institutional variables that change more slowly than others. The economic or social barriers that affect who has access to particular media as well as those that affect how media are employed are unlikely to change at the whims of a particular administration. Thus, although a centralized one-party state such as China has considerable ability to adapt policy to changing technological or political contexts, it must necessarily do so within boundaries that are delimited by the nature of media themselves.

In this chapter I have analyzed modes of control over televised media by focusing primarily on positive developments in the entertainment sphere of China's television ecology. That is, I have focused on what has happened with respect to entertainment programming, remaining silent on what has not happened with respect to news programming. To wit, entertainment programming has been allowed to experiment with private production whereas news programming has not. In the next chapter, I will deal with TV news more explicitly by way of a comparison with news production in the television and newspaper ecologies, respectively.

## CHAPTER SIX: CHINESE NEWS MEDIA ECOLOGIES

The newspaper industry offers a distinct vantage point onto what may be termed the conceptual problem of media convergence in the 21st century. To wit, when content can be consumed via multiple platforms, how should one categorize media? Is a newspaper the physical artefact of black and white printed words on twice-folder paper? Is it the content produced by newspaper publishers, which can be read on any number of digital computers? Or is it something else?

I will not attempt to offer a definitive answer to these questions here. However, as I have tried to convey throughout this dissertation, although media are constituted by the material artefacts through which ideas are transmitted, they also comprise the social artefacts and institutions that develop around these technologies. Thus, even though consumers can, today, enjoy the *New York Times* or the *People's Daily* via a mobile phone, tablet, or desktop computer, the newspaper ecology is best characterized by the kinds of relationships that grew first out of the technology of the printing press and the social practices associated with periodical news production and consumption. These relationships continue to leave an indelible mark on what was, until only recently, strictly print news. By employing an ecological perspective of media, one can hold onto the qualities of the actors and interactions that distinguish printed news from, on the one hand, printed literature and, on the other, televised news: the authors, editors, and consumers of the written words that document our social lives from day to day and from week to week.

In the preceding chapter, I showed that modes of control over media may vary according to the content communicated by such media. That is, one should not expect state strategies for managing speech to conform to a template simply based on the nature of a technology itself. Thus, within the television ecology, two modes of control sit side by side: one over televised

entertainment programming and another over televised news programming. However, the argument made about entertainment content was explicit, while that about news content was implicit. The fact that televised news programming had not been subject to similar privatizing movements as televised entertainment programming merely implied the political importance of news as a particular form of media content. In this chapter, I make that argument explicitly. Moreover, I build on the preceding analysis by juxtaposing the communication of the same type of content—news journalism—via two different media technologies: television and newspaper.

In this chapter, in addition to demonstrating how modes of control over news content diverge from modes of control over literary or entertainment forms of media content, the subjects of the previous three chapters, I seek to demonstrate how control varies between these two dissimilar technologies, newspaper and television. Whereas the previous chapter sought to show how modes of control are not determined by technology, this chapter will reveal how the technologies of television and newspaper, nonetheless, constrain social actors in significant ways. In short, the state's strategies for controlling news content communicated via these media reflect the different opportunities made possible by variation, not only in the economics of TV versus print journalism, but also in the social practices associated with either medium and, in turn, the political and administrative constraints confronting the state.

I begin this chapter by historicizing news media in the PRC, highlighting its political significance, especially in its fraught role as a bridge between the Party and the people. I will then elaborate the information ecology of print news, but with an eye toward what distinguishes it from televised news ecology. I close the chapter with a discussion of modes of control over both broadcast and print news media, which share many important similarities but, because of features of either ecology, are not identical. Notably, qualities of the newspaper ecology favor

investigative journalism practices that tend to be more critical of political leaders than those of television. As I will show, this reflects the fact that, on the one hand, newspaper publishers and journalists have greater economic and professional incentives to take risks than television media workers and, on the other, the state has a circumscribed ability to manage political speech over a more decentralized and autonomous groups of actors.

### **News Media in China**

News media, whether printed or otherwise, are not simply periodical records of events, or "news" as such. More than that, news media have, historically, played a role in interpreting the political, cultural, and social events of a particular period in time, helping consumers to place these events within the context of history as well as within a framework of values. News content—what has happened—is, thus, typically presented alongside, and with varying levels of differentiation from, editorial content—how to think about what has happened. As such, news media are essential and versatile social power resources, tools that can be used either to check or to buttress political power in general, and state power in particular. They are, therefore, also deeply implicated in the dilemma of state power. To the extent that a regime needs to legitimize its rule, it may either need to actively employ news media or refrain from interfering with the independent work of news media organizations.

In the Western liberal tradition, the role of the news media has been that of an adversary to state power. News media, it is often held, ought to be free from government interference in their task of uncovering and identifying some version of the truth. Ideally, they should also serve the interests of the public, especially insofar as these interests are encroached upon by the state.

Thus, it is argued, the press ought to be free with respect to the state, and responsible with respect to society (Siebert, et al. 1956). This is, of course, an ideal. In reality, pressures from the private sphere as well as from the state—including, simply, the ability of states to limit media access to information—determine that the Western liberal press often plays a propagandistic role, even if inadvertently (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

In contrast, the tradition in the PRC has its roots in what Siebert, et al. (1956) have called the “Soviet Communist” model of the press. In communist China, the press was explicitly a tool of the Party, and its role was exclusively propagandistic. To facilitate the creation of a communist society, the Party needed not only to transform society, but also to inculcate the masses on an ongoing basis, and the press was the primary vehicle through which it could perform this function. Thus, in China, the role of the press was not simply to report on events in society, but also to

cultivate a degree of intellectual sophistication in the people [stemming] from the Maoist philosophy that the mass media, coupled with grassroots oral participation, could transform the Chinese population (Chen 2016: 28; Liu 1971).

To this end, the press needed to legitimize the ruling regime by identifying and elaborating the achievements of socialism, and by explaining and interpreting new policies within the context of a socialist ideological framework. In the news media tradition of the PRC, then, the line between news and editorial was blurred. According to one journalist from Beijing Television, "We used to regard news and propaganda as the same [thing]" (Polumbaum 2008, p. 151).

The press was, thus, above all, a pedagogical tool of the state, a direct line of communication from the Party to the people. But if the line was direct, it was not necessarily unidirectional, nor had the directionality of its influence been fixed. Indeed, this may be where

the tradition of the Chinese communist press diverges from the Soviet Communist stereotype outlined by Siebert, et al. The Chinese communist press tradition, although heavily influenced by the Soviet model, also has strong links to the Confucian tradition of the critical intellectual.

Chinese Confucian intellectuals traditionally see themselves as a bridge between ruling elites and ordinary people in society ... not only as those who should transfer the commands of the ruling class to the people, but also the ones who should petition for the people (*shangtong xiada*), help the people gain justice and make their voice heard by the ruling class (Tong 2011, p. 17-18).

According to Jingrong Tong (2011), journalists in China see themselves and are regarded by society as public intellectuals and, therefore, inherit the burdens of the Confucian intellectual in communist society: they must at once be the voice of the Party and the people. Indeed, throughout the history of the PRC, the Party itself has called upon the press to fulfill this role by voicing the concerns of the people and criticizing Party leadership. These contradictions were manifest in increasingly radical terms during the Maoist period, which was characterized by the ebb and flow of a permissive, then draconian party-state, and a critical, then prostrate news media. From the Yan'an Rectification Campaign (1942),<sup>13</sup> to the "One Hundred Flowers" Movement<sup>14</sup> (1957), to the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and culminating most tragically in the Cultural Revolution<sup>15</sup> (1966 – 1976),

<sup>13</sup> During the Yan'an Rectification Campaign, Mao consolidated power by purging critical intellectuals from the ranks of the Party.

<sup>14</sup> In 1957, Mao encouraged intellectuals to critique the Party leadership, calling on them to "let one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred schools of thought contend." This brief period of openness was followed immediately by an intellectual purge during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1958.

<sup>15</sup> The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976, during which time the media's role as mouthpiece of the Party effectively ceased, becoming instead the personal mouthpiece of Mao and the so-called "Gang of Four" in opposition to the established Party elite.

Mao Zedong initiated a succession of campaigns in which media played a key part, with periods of intense mobilization followed by corrective retrenchment ... Journalists and media organizations were important agents at every stage, serving as conduits for social criticism and then as an instrument of party discipline (Polumbaum 2013).

These vicissitudes would continue into the reform period with perhaps less dramatic, but not less significant swings. Fatefully, one such period of Party permissiveness and press-led criticism ended in the Tiananmen Square protests and subsequent massacre. Arguably, this dialectic continues today, though in much subtler forms. Indeed, at the turn of the millennium, a form of watchdog journalism was innovated at none other than state-run China Central Television (CCTV). Pioneered by a CCTV program called *Focus*, a wave of investigative journalism, characterized by in-depth reportage on corporate scandals, the corruption of local officials, and the plight of China's most vulnerable citizens, was imitated at several subnational TV stations and metropolitan newspapers (Tong 2011). Jingrong Tong (2011) argues that the critical news programs and publications of the late 1990s were permitted to thrive because they served Party imperatives, which, in an era of rapid economic change, included bolstering its legitimacy as benefactor of the people. In recent years, however, the Party's political calculus has changed, but for reasons that I will elaborate below, it has been difficult to put the genie back in the bottle.

It is out of this historical context that the Chinese news media of the Reform Period have emerged. In sum, news media constitute versatile means of social power, which can just as easily be used to bolster or to sunder the state's legitimacy. But whereas in the liberal tradition of the press the role of the media is supposed to be that of a watchdog for the public, in China, news media's role is more akin to the Party's "guard dog," whose leash is tightened or given slack depending on political circumstances (Tong 2011). As I will argue below, both the ability and



the need of the Party to reign in news media reflect constraints imposed on it and on news media themselves by their various ecological contexts.

### **The Information Ecology of News Media**

In this section, I will compare the information ecology of print journalism with that of its broadcast counterpart. As I have already discussed the television ecology at length, the section deals primarily with print news, but highlights differences between either ecology in terms of three subjects: the consumers, productive institutions, and authors of news content.

#### *Consumers: Readers vs. Viewers*

In 2011, Christoph Riess, CEO of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, remarked, “Circulation is like the sun. It continues to rise in the East and decline in the West” (Hooke 2012). The contrast between the newspaper industries in China and the United States supports this image. Between the years 2009 and 2013, revenues for the US newspaper publishing industry decreased by 21% while average daily circulation decreased by 11% (WAN-IFRA 2014; IBISWorld 2015). During that same span, revenues in the Chinese publishing industry increased by 28% and circulation increased by 11% (ibid; Tables 1 and 2). And while revenues from advertising have declined by 30% in the US newspaper industry, they have increased by almost 8% in the Chinese newspaper industry (WAN-IFRA 2014; Table 3).

**Table 6.1. Total Paid-for and Free Dailies, Total Average Circulation (000)**

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2013/2009 in%
China	107,850	109,902	108,111	120,061	120,061	11.32%
USA	48,574	46,709	46,717	45,729	43,008	-11.46%

Source: WAN-IFRA 2014

**Table 6.2. Newspaper Industry Revenue, 2009 - 2013 (Millions USD)**

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2013/2009 in%
China	10,724	11,819	13,609	15,032	13,740	28.13%
USA	40,336	38,034	35,621	34,008	32,019	-20.62%

Source: IBISWorld 2015

**Table 6.3. Newspaper Revenues from Advertising, 2009 - 2013 (Millions USD)**

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2013/2009 in%
China	5.95	6.13	7.55	7.02	6.41	7.57%
USA	32.97	29.67	27.15	24.98	22.98	-30.30%

Source: WAN-IFRA 2014

Notwithstanding these trends, competition from other media for advertising and readers has and will continue to intensify. Newspaper advertising revenue as a share of total media and entertainment advertising revenue in China fell by approximately 40% between 2009 and 2013 (WAN-IFRA 2014). However, unlike many of the wealthy societies of the West, China's middle class is in its ascendance, with increasing numbers of citizens enjoying greater amounts of disposable income. Thus, even as urban citizens tend increasingly to consume news content on mobile devices and tablets, their rural counterparts offset would-be declines in sales revenue by purchasing physical newspapers, the prices of which remain comparatively low—the average cover price of a daily newspaper was 0.12 USD in 2014 (IBISWorld 2015; PWC 2015). In short,

these data show that newspapers—whether physical or digital—continue to be a vital source of news and opinion for Chinese consumers.

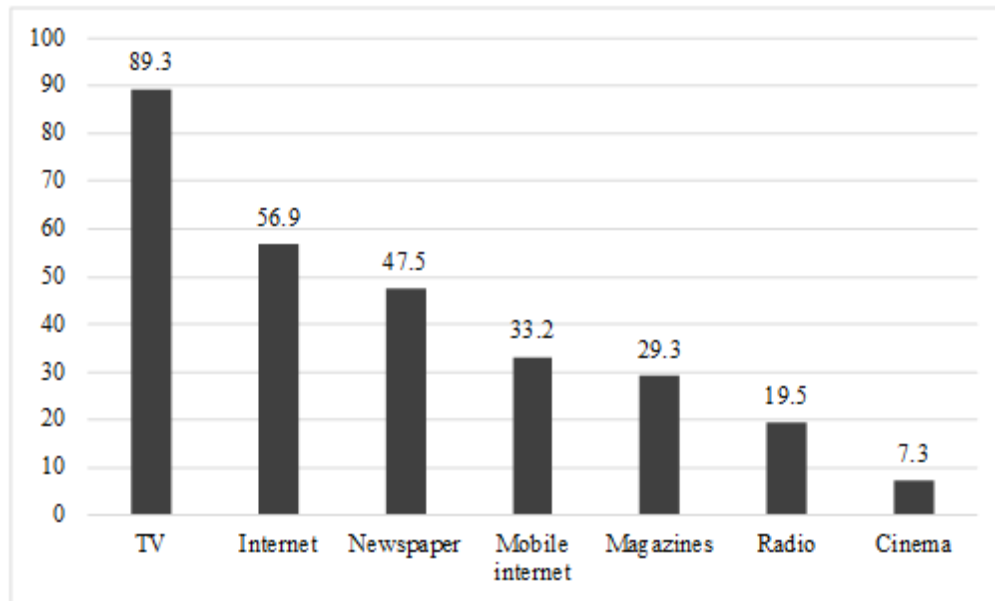
But even while Chinese newspaper circulation and revenues buck trends in the US and in the West, they still have not overturned the dominance of television as the medium of choice for Chinese consumers. As I have argued in the chapters on film and books, barriers to consumer access are not constituted solely by economic constraints. In the case of printed media, social barriers—including education, time, and social practices—are significant also. Whereas there is a minimum reading proficiency necessary to consume a newspaper—approximately 3,000 Chinese characters—television can be enjoyed by the literate and the illiterate, the old and the young alike. “The television set is a one-time investment and viewing is free, which fits well with the consumption pattern and power of ordinary Chinese people” (Zhang 2009, p. 172). Thus, for many Chinese, television provides both an affordable way to enjoy leisure time at home and an accessible source of news and opinion.

It may not be surprising, then, that the average Chinese media consumer spends a great deal more time watching television than reading a newspaper or a magazine combined (Table 4). Moreover, a greater proportion of the adult Chinese population is exposed to television than to newspapers on a daily basis. Each day, television reaches 90 percent more of the adult population than do newspapers, and about 200 percent more than do magazines (Figure 1). Of course, as I have shown in the preceding chapter, Chinese consumers are not only watching the news when they turn on their TV sets. But even when comparing sources of news, Chinese consumers rank newspapers 3rd behind television and now internet-based sources (cite).

**Table 6.4. Average Time Spent with Media (Minutes/Day)**

<i>Medium</i>	<i>Time Spent</i>
<i>TV</i>	95
<i>Internet</i>	51
<i>Mobile</i>	22
<i>Newspapers</i>	16
<i>Magazines</i>	10

Source: CAPP 2013

**Figure 6.1. Media Reach,<sup>16</sup> 2012**

Source: China Business News (CBN) 2013

In short, perhaps the most politically significant contrast between the ecologies of TV and newspapers is that of their consuming audiences. TV audiences are larger, average consumers spend more time with TV than with newspapers (or magazines), and when consuming news, are more likely to do so via the television. From the perspective of the state, therefore, not all news

<sup>16</sup> Reach refers to the percentage of adults exposed, at least once, to a medium each day.

consuming audiences are created the same, and there is a greater political imperative to manage news content that originates from television than there is for print news.

### *Institutions: Newspaper Publishers vs. TV Stations*

The newspaper ecology's analogy to the TV station is the newspaper publisher. Like TV stations, publishers are both the organizations in which productive capital is concentrated and the only institutions authorized to produce news content legally. Thus, like television stations, capital barriers prohibit most members of society from owning or operating a news producing enterprise, and legal barriers prevent any individual or organization from having more than a 49% stake in ownership. Even capital intensity in the publishing and broadcasting industries do not diverge radically: IBISWorld estimates that for every dollar spent on labor in the newspaper publishing industry, about 34 cents are invested in capital, compared to approximately 43 cents in the broadcasting industry (IBIS 2014). However, the similarities between newspaper publishers and television stations do not go far beyond this point.

Notwithstanding similar levels of capital intensity, the nature of capital inputs in the newspaper publishing industry is quite different from that of the broadcasting industry. The moderate level of capital intensity in the TV industry reflects the fact that *both* labor and capital are significant costs for TV stations (Table 5). But television stations spend more than twice the proportion of their revenue on depreciation costs as do newspapers, and almost twice as much on labor. This is because, unlike newspaper publishers, TV stations are not simply involved in the production, but also in the transmission of televised content. Transmitting equipment and their upkeep, therefore, constitute a major capital cost for which there is no analog in the publishing

industry (IBISWorld 2014). In contrast, capital inputs in the newspaper ecology are largely devoted to news production. Although large newspapers may have their own printing facilities, many newspapers outsource this function to dedicated printers. Capital costs are, therefore, dedicated primarily to provisioning journalists and other media staff with computers, cameras, and office equipment.

**Table 6.5. Capital and Labor Costs as Percentage of Industry Revenue, 2013**

	<i>Capital</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Capital Intensity</i>
<i>TV Stations</i>	12.1%	27.9%	.43
<i>Newspapers</i>	5%	14.9%	.34

Source: IBISWorld 2014

Despite these capital barriers, however, there are actually more television stations than newspapers in China. In 2013, there were 2,373 TV stations, including 166 national or province-level stations and 2,207 sub-provincial (transmission only) stations, and 1,915 newspaper publishers (ACJA 2014). In contrast to a purely economic theory of media, this suggests that other, perhaps political or administrative, factors have an additional influence on levels of industry concentration. Indeed, as showed in the previous chapter, although the growth in the number of TV stations during the 1980s in part reflected the economic effects of media organizations permitted to seek advertising revenue on the free market, the subsequent closure and re-categorization of the majority of stations had explicitly political causes.

In contrast to the TV industry, the newspaper industry has not experienced similar fluctuations either in the total number of newspapers or in their administrative organization over the past two decades. Like the television industry, when media organizations were permitted to raise revenues via advertising, the number of newspapers in China spiked. In 1980, there were

188 newspapers in China, each published by a Party organization. By 1985, that number had ballooned to 1,445 and peaked at 2,163 in 1996 (NBS 2016). However, since then, in contrast to the television industry, the total number of publications has remained relatively stable, thanks in part to the fact that the newspaper industry never underwent the administrative recentralization reform to which the TV industry was subjected. Thus, the difference in the concentration of either industry and the fluctuation of industry participants in recent years are largely political and administrative, as opposed to economic effects. Such administrative variation is not, however, divorced from economic concerns. Due in large part to its relative decentralization, newspaper publishing is a far more competitive industry: there are simply far more independent newspaper publishers (1,915) than there are independent television stations (166). Moreover, IBISWorld estimates that the market share of the top four broadcast enterprises was 25% in 2013. By contrast, the market share of the top four newspaper publishers was roughly half of that (12%) (IBIS 2014).

The relative decentralization and competitiveness of the newspaper industry, in turn, help to explain another significant difference between the broadcast and publishing ecologies: the dominance of national television broadcasters versus the dominance of coastal municipal newspaper publishers. In the TV industry, administrative centralization determines that the industry is dominated—in terms of both consumer and revenue share—by the central state broadcaster, CCTV. It is estimated that each day roughly 650 million viewers tune in to CCTV, and the average Chinese viewer spends almost one third of her time watching CCTV programs (Hong, et al. 2009, p. 47). In contrast, the newspaper ecology is dominated by publishers who operate out of large and wealthy coastal cities, where circulation numbers and advertising revenues are at their greatest. These papers, therefore, have more resources at their disposal and

can offer both monetary and quality-of-life incentives to journalists in order to attract the best talent (Ma 2000). It is also from within China's wealthy coastal publishers that the most critical journalism emerges, a subject to which I will return below.

*Authors: Journalists*

News production requires skilled labor and, generally speaking, journalists are well-educated. According to the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) Chinese Journalism Development Report, 99.7% of China's journalists hold an Associate (2-year) degree or higher, with 65.7% holding a Bachelor's degree and 7.4% holding a master's degree or higher (ACJA 2014). Media workers are also compensated relatively well. Whereas in 2013 the average starting salary for college graduates was 2,443 yuan (\$395) per month, 55% percent of media workers in China earned at least 5,000 yuan (\$815) per month (Global Times 2014; Cao 2014).

As these numbers suggest, media workers are highly skilled individuals. Thus, even were journalists unconstrained by economic factors such as access to manufactured capital, social constraints such as education and aptitude would represent barriers to participation in news authorship. Moreover, as China's news media are increasingly subject to commercial pressures, there is competition between news organizations for, among other things, journalists. This is a notable point of difference between the broadcast and print news ecologies, the latter of which is both a more competitive industry and relies more heavily on what are called outside-the-system (tǐzhìwài 体制外) or freelance journalists.

Because all newspapers are technically owned by the state—share of non-state investment in media outlets may not exceed 49 percent of revenues—all news media workers,



whether working for a TV station or a newspaper, are, in theory, employees of the state. In practice, journalist employment and remuneration are not so straightforward. On the one hand, there are two news media worlds: an official cohort of staff journalists and an unofficial cohort of freelance journalists. Staff journalists are what are referred to as "inside the system" (tǐzhìnèi 体制内) journalists and are remunerated according to a fixed schedule that corresponds to their rank in a news organization, irrespective of whether they work for a national or local publisher (Ma 2005, p. 18). In addition to their salaries, staff journalists enjoy pensions, health insurance, subsidized housing, and, importantly, job security (Tong 2011: 92). In contrast, freelance or "outside the system" (tǐzhìwài 体制外) journalists are hired on a fixed-term contract basis and lack the job security of a salaried position. On the other hand, since a 1993 remunerative reform, news organizations have been given more leeway to pay journalists "flexible wages": in order to supplement a journalist's basic wages, a news organization may offer performance-based incentives, such as compensation for writing more articles (Chen and Lee 1998).

As allocations for staff journalists are set by the state center, the subsidies available for media organizations to spend on journalism are fixed. Thus, freelance journalism and "flexible wages" are essential means by which commercialized media organizations can maneuver outside the constraints of the central bursar in order to incentivize production by journalists. In practice, such performance based flexible wages are often distributed on the basis of quantity as opposed to quality, and include

"article payments," or *gaofei*, per-word payments based on the number of words published, and "reimbursements," or *baoxiao*, through which they pay a reporter's personal expense receipts in cash for an amount agreed upon outside the employment contract (Bandurski and Hala 2010, p. 106).

The flexible wage system in combination with the staff-freelance distinction can lead to stark hierarchies within a news organization between those who have job security and those who do not. And when “a lengthy reporting assignment can mean great personal sacrifice,” these institutions can favor caution on the part of journalists who lack job security (Bandurski and Hala 2010, p. 107). According to Ying Chan,

Such a system discourages risk-taking as reporters opt to pursue “safe” stories that run no risk of being censored (Chan 2010, p. 6).

On the other hand, the institutions of freelance journalism and flexible wages have also resulted in greater autonomy for both journalists and news organization and are, at least in part, responsible for the limited rise of investigative or “watchdog” journalism in China. Each of these institutions lend themselves to greater autonomy for financially independent news organizations, which, as I have suggested, tend to be located in China’s wealthy coastal municipalities. It is these organizations that have the resources to allow journalists the considerable amount of time necessary to pursue investigative stories (Tong and Sparks 2009). Moreover, whereas beat reporters may be judged based on quantitative output, investigative journalists can be compensated handsomely for researching and writing a single quality report. Indeed, many newspapers, such as the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, will compensate a journalist even if the article is not published for political reasons (Tong 2011, p. 111). Finally, as I will argue below, a news organization that has dedicated itself to investigative journalism may shield its journalists from direct retribution by the state. As Jingrong Tong has argued,

Several decades ago, it was individual journalists who conducted investigative reporting and ran the political risks alone. . . . Today, media organizations or their high-ranking news staff members are often punished rather than individual journalists (Tong 2011, p. 112).

Of course, this is certainly not always the case. Journalists are the most vulnerable media actors in any of China's media ecologies and, as I will show below, the frequent targets of physical coercion and intimidation. However, as I will also discuss below, the editorial staffs of news organizations often take the fall for intrepid reportage. That this is increasingly a possibility, in combination with the institutions of freelancing and flexible wages, may encourage individual journalists to take the risks involved in critical journalism. In short, in addition to greater risks, there are also greater economic rewards that incentivize certain kinds—namely investigative as opposed to beat—of freelance journalism.

The freelance/staff distinction is another point of variation between the TV and print news ecologies: freelance journalism is far more common in print than TV news. Although the capital and resources necessary to author news articles—computers, cameras, internet connection—are often provided by the newspaper publisher, they are increasingly within the means of individual journalists. Thus, as within the book publications ecology, access to manufactured capital is not a major barrier to authorship in print journalism. TV journalists, in contrast, face greater capital-related barriers to authorship. Filming and transmitting equipment are prohibitively expensive and subject to frequent technological turnover. These constraints are compounded by the fact that TV journalists often work as part of a team—a journalist and a cameraperson—who have to coordinate travel with each other as well as with their interview subjects. Unlike in print journalism:

In TV you can't base a story on a phone call; you have to go there. When we go out to report, the cameraman carries equipment weighing dozens of pounds, and I carry the heavy tripod. To set up a story, we need to make many calls, but many people don't like to be interviewed. .... I often get rejected (Ai Da quoted in Polumbaum 2012).

TV journalists, then, in contrast to print journalists are constrained by access to the resources and relationships that are concentrated in the institution of the TV station. Moreover, they are constrained by the financial demands of the mode of presentation, which requires a visual story and, thus, also travel to the location of the subject. The TV journalist is, therefore, in ways that the print journalist is not, attached to the institution of the TV station. This attachment is amplified by the two-tier administrative structure of the television industry: even if a journalist could independently finance her own production, she would still need to work closely with one of a limited set of TV stations in order to distribute her story. In contrast, in the print news ecology, lower financial barriers to authorship combined with a far more competitive industry create the conditions within which freelancers can make a living. And although there do exist freelance TV journalists, these constraints determine that they are less common than in the print news ecology.

In short, in each news ecology, social barriers such as education determine that authorial capacity within news media are restricted to a small group of journalists. However, variation exists between the print and broadcast news ecologies. In terms of the latter, access to equipment and resources are much greater barriers to participation, making TV journalists more dependent on the resources of organizations than print journalists. Print journalists, then, are a relatively decentralized and autonomous group of actors vis-à-vis broadcast journalists. As I will argue in the next section, this fact shapes the state's strategy of managing political speech in either ecology.

## Control

State control over news media reflects the constraints and opportunities presented to the state by either media ecology. On the one hand, the television news ecology is characterized by a nearly saturated consumer market, a highly centralized industry of TV stations, and a dependent corps of journalists. On the other hand, compared with the broadcast news ecology, the newspaper ecology is characterized by a relatively limited consumer market, a relatively decentralized and numerous group of publishers, and a relatively autonomous journalist corps who, given industry reliance on freelancers, have greater economic incentives to pursue politically risky stories.

Below, I contrast modes of state control over either ecology by focusing on how it operates at two levels of analysis: at an institutional level in the organization of the publisher or broadcaster, and at an individual level over the person of the journalist.

### *Institutional Control: Propaganda and Appointments*

Yuezhi Zhao has argued that although

the reform period has generally been characterized as an era of neoliberal downsizing of the government, captured in the “small government, big society” slogan, the same period has [also] seen a steady increase in the number of government departments and bureaus in the communication field (Zhao 2008, p. 22).

Between 1982 and 2008, the number of state ministries was reduced from 52 to 27—a reduction from 40 to 29 in 1998 alone (Li 2013; Zhao 2008). Concurrent with this streamlining, the state added several new media-related ministries with closer ties to the Party as well as added

personnel to existing agencies, such as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) (Zhao 2008).

However, this dichotomy of general administrative streamlining alongside media-related expansion is misleading or, perhaps, incomplete. That is, in the realm of media, and in that of news media particularly, the trend has not been so linear. Although the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the state expand the number of media-related bureaus and personnel, it oversaw a major administrative consolidation in 2013, when SARFT and GAPP were combined into the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT).

But even this nonlinear process of expansion and concentration neglects the most central fact about the management of the news media in China: the ultimate authority over media organizations lies, not in state institutions, per se, but in the Party institutions that authorize and guide them. Thus, notwithstanding recent consolidating reforms, several mechanisms had already been in place to ensure that in the realm of news media the Party can exercise direct, centralized, and, in certain cases, preemptive forms of control over news media organizations, if not always over the individual journalists working within them.

First, although the creation of SAPPRFT was without doubt a centralizing reform, it belies the fact that each of its two predecessors, GAPP and SARFT, took direction, as SAPPRFT does now, from the same organization: the CCP Publicity Department<sup>17</sup> (PD). The PD's authority over state institutions is bolstered by the fact that leadership positions in each are reserved for top Party leaders. For example, the director of SAPPRFT, Cai Fuchao, is both a member of the CCP Central Committee and a member of the PD leadership. And since several media-related

<sup>17</sup> Formerly the CCP Propaganda Department. In 1998, after learning that "propaganda" has a negative connotation in English, Party leadership officially changed the Propaganda Department's English name to the "Department of Publicity."

ministries are subject to direct influence by the PD—SAPPRFT, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology,<sup>18</sup> and the Ministry of Culture—the creation of SAPPRFT not only obscures the underlying level of centralization that preceded it, but also the level of centralization that exists currently.

The PD is responsible for propagating the Party line in the areas of “ideology and culture” and the primary means by which it performs this function is via so-called “propaganda disciplines” or “propaganda directives” (*xuānchuán jìlǜ* 宣传纪律). Propaganda directives are “a set of implicit and explicit policy statements, and instructions governing the operation of the news media” (Zhao 2008). They may include so-called “red-headed” documents, such as speeches made by prominent CCP members, or “official” opinions appearing in Party papers. Media are also disciplined via face-to-face meetings where editors may be briefed on sensitive topics, notified of the right and wrong ways to report on a particular subject, and given general editorial direction by PD staff. But most often, propaganda directives are short notes about *how* (or how *not*) to cover a story, relayed daily to news media including Internet news websites. China media scholar Xiao Qiang has collected over 2,600 such directives leaked since 2003, and the objects of control range from the mundane to the bizarre (Link 2013):

“Report on the new provincial budget tomorrow, but do not feature it on the front page, make no comparisons to earlier budgets, list no links, and say nothing that might raise questions”

“mention without hyping”

“publish but only under small headlines”

<sup>18</sup> “The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) is the authority overseeing the telecommunications and information technology industry in the PRC. It is also responsible for supervising Internet information services and shares responsibility with GAPP for online publishing activities” (Stewart, et al. 2012, p. 16).

“put only on back pages”

“Downplay stories on Kim Jung-un’s facelift”

Long-standing norms also set the parameters outside of which autonomous publication is strictly prohibited: for example, the rule that certain topics may only be reported by state-run Xinhua News Agency or that Party papers are prohibited from criticizing their affiliated party committee. Such rules are so well engrained that they are rarely transgressed, at least not knowingly. If they are, the Party may either retroactively or preemptively act to censor content, depending on when it catches wind of errant reporting. In one case, in 2013, National History magazine had spent six months researching a story about Taiwan's democratization. Such a subject is particularly taboo in China because, on the one hand, discussions of democratization may be interpreted as critical of the regime and, on the other, because Taiwan is considered a province of China by the Chinese government and, thus, a threat to its sovereignty. National History was ordered to suspend its entire February issue “due to an inappropriate selection of topics” (Taipei Times 2013). Later that year, the majority of the paper’s 20-member editorial team was forced to resign (Freedom House 2013). Some topics are never to be reported independently—protests and other “mass events,” for example—and others are delineated as situations unfold. For example, CCTV News Channel and Xinhua News Agency are “the only two Chinese media institutions that can go on-site to record, interview, and report on foreign national leaders’ visits” (Xie 2014, p. 96).

Thus, through the institution of the PD and the tool of propaganda directives, the Party is able to wield reasonably direct, centralized, and, with respect to subjects of particular political importance, preemptive control over news media content, leaving all other matters to the discretion of individual newsrooms. This feature of institutional control is shared between the



broadcast and newspaper publishing ecologies. Nevertheless, there is a distinct difference in what may be called the administrative distance between the Party center and television news rooms, on the one hand, and newspaper publishers, on the other. This distance reflects variation in the administrative centralization of either ecology. The relative decentralization of the newspaper publishing industry means that there are simply more print newsrooms than there are broadcast newsrooms in China. Although the Party can give general direction via propaganda directives, it is unable to micromanage nearly 2,000 newspapers from day to day, and from minute to minute. Print newsrooms, therefore, operate with a level of autonomy unseen in their broadcast counterparts. For this reason, they are more often subject to a second form of institutional control, which reflects the fact that news media—TV stations and newspaper publishers—are technically state-owned enterprises.

Despite increasing movement toward privatization, private-registered capital may not exceed 49 percent in any news media organization (IBIS 2014). The Party, therefore, can have a significant amount of influence over the leadership at each organization, by either making or removing appointments to the leadership of news organizations. Though in practice, news organizations operate as private organizations—they hire and fire staff, sell advertising space, and, outside of propaganda directives, make decisions about content autonomously—the party-state retains the authority to reshuffle leadership at its whim. Editors (and journalists) may be put on involuntary “sabbatical,” may be “side-shuffled” or reassigned as a disciplinary measure, demoted, or formally dismissed from their positions (CPJ 2011; IFEX 2011). As I have noted above, a 20-member editorial team at *National History* magazine was summarily forced into resignation in advance of a feature story about Taiwan's democratization. A sampling of

dismissals between 2011 and 2013 illustrates the arbitrariness of the line that Chinese editors must walk:

2013: Deng Yuwen, a deputy editor at Study Times was suspended indefinitely for publishing an opinion article recommending China to abandon North Korea (Chosun 2013).

2012: Chang Ping, an editor at the Guangdong-based Southern Metropolis Daily was first demoted and later forced to resign over articles about the 2008 uprisings in Tibet (Johnson 2012).

2012: The entire senior management team of Biancheng Evening Newspaper, including the editor-in-chief, were removed after publishing the results of a survey in which citizens complained about increased inflation before the Lunar New Year (IFJ 2012).

2011: Wang Keqin, a journalist and editor at China Economic Times, was removed and his five-person investigative unit dissolved for writing an article about tainted vaccines in Shanxi Province (Chin 2011)

In sum, even short of direct propaganda disciplines, the Party is able to create an environment in which the leadership of news media—editors, in particular—are acutely aware of the boundaries beyond which they must proceed with caution. The Party depends on the day-to-day compliance of editorial staff, on their willingness not to overstep these boundaries, but in the event that they do, it retains the authority to replace them.

#### *Individuals: Cooptation, Coercion, and Intimidation*

Journalists find themselves in a particularly precarious situation, reflecting the political importance that the Party places on the production of news content and its acknowledgment of journalists' increasing autonomy. Despite—or because of—their relative autonomy, journalists face additional state-imposed barriers to independent authorship of news content. On the one

hand, journalists are required to formally register with the state in order to practice their profession and, on the other hand, they are subjected to more regular forms of coercion and intimidation than other media actors.

Journalists are the only individual actors within the traditional media ecologies who are compelled to register with the state prior to exercising their capacity to author information goods. In order to legally practice their profession, journalists and editors must obtain government-issued press cards every five years (CECC 2009). The administration of press cards is overseen jointly by GAPP, SARFT, and the state news agency, Xinhua. In order to obtain a press card, journalists are required to take a training program in “official ideology, media policies and regulations, journalism ethics, communication theory, and related topics” (Zhao 2008, p. 29). And beginning in 2010, a qualifying examination was added

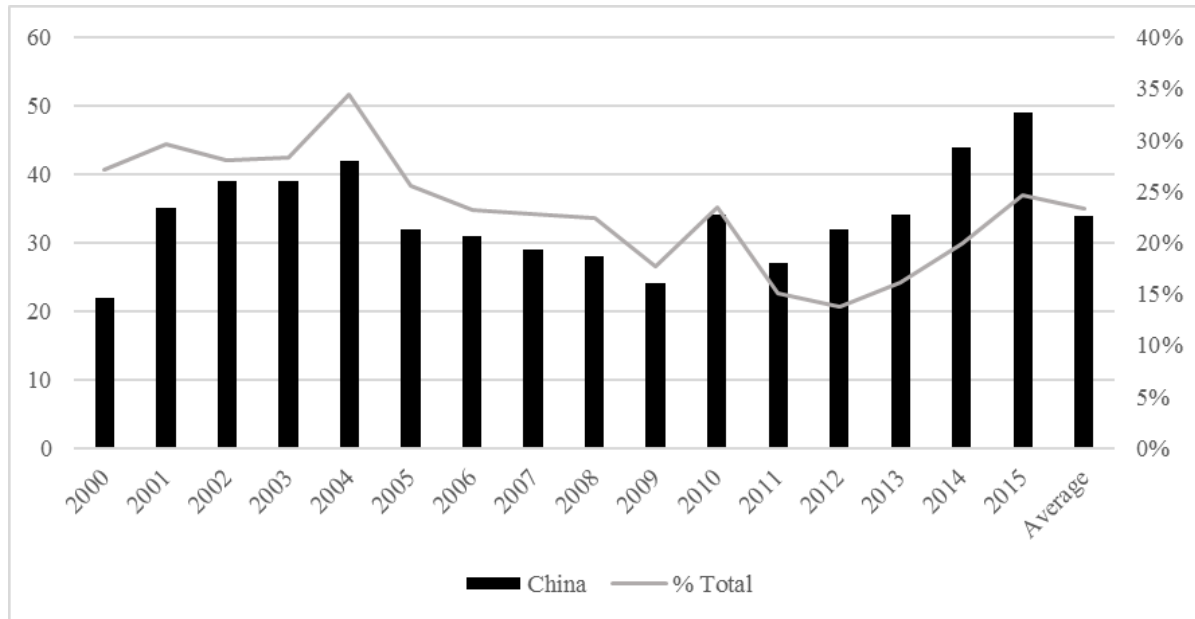
to ensure that all comrades who will enter the frontlines of news reporting first study the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and receive training on the Marxist view of news, training in journalist ethics, and training about the Party's news propaganda discipline. Our news workers can never lose this "spirit", which is a news worker's sense of political and historical responsibility... (Li Dongdong, quoted in CECC 2010).

By controlling who is authorized to legally practice journalism, the state can artificially manipulate the size of the journalist corps as well as document the identities of those producing news content and, thereby, put pressure on those journalists who do not toe the Party line. In 2013, about 258,000 journalists had qualified for press cards: approximately 100,000 working for newspapers, 145,000 working for radio and television (broadcast) stations, and the remainder working for periodicals and news agencies (ACJA 2014). Of course, although many freelancers have obtained press cards, there are an unknown but not insignificant number of them who are

working without permits, and these journalists are the most vulnerable to forms of physical intimidation.

Of all media actors discussed thus far, journalists are the most frequent subjects of physical coercion (CECC 2015). In 2013, China ranked third behind Turkey and Iran in number of imprisoned journalists with 34, exactly the average of the last 16 years (CPJ 2014; 2016; Fig. 2). In 13 of the last 16 years, China has ranked first in number of imprisoned journalists, which does not simply reflect the fact that China is the world's most populous nation. In an average year, China imprisons 23% of the world's imprisoned journalists, five percentage points more than its share of the world population (CPJ 2016). The most common charges leveled against these journalists were "inciting subversion," "subverting state power," "disclosing state secrets," and "separatism," a charge that tends to be handed down to ethnic minorities from Tibet or Xinjiang (Uighur). In fact, Tibetan and Uighur minorities tend to be overrepresented in the number of imprisoned journalists, reflecting their heightened level of vulnerability to coercion. In 2013, half of the 34 imprisoned journalists in China were either Tibetan (10) or Uighur (7) ethnic minorities.

**Figure 6.2. Imprisoned Journalists in China  
and Proportion of Total Imprisoned Journalists Worldwide by Year**



Source: Committee to Protect Journalists

Another disparity in imprisonment is between staff and freelance journalists. Of the 34 jailed journalists in 2013, 23 were freelance journalists. Of course, this does not simply reflect the relative vulnerability of freelance journalists, but also the relative level of risk freelance journalists may be comfortable with. As salaried employees with benefits, staff journalists may be less willing to risk their livelihoods in order to make political statements. Indeed, as one survey of staff journalists has shown, they tend to perceive their primary roles as wage earners and family providers rather than humanitarians or interest group spokespeople (Table 6). Moreover, as freelancers are more likely to work in the newspaper industry, print journalists “appear to bear the brunt of the violence” exacted on news media workers (Beach 2004).

**Table 6.6. Role Perceptions of Journalists<sup>19</sup>**

<i>Role</i>	<i>All Media</i>	<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>TV</i>	<i>Online</i>
<i>Wage Earner</i>	4.25	4.25	4.34	4.24
<i>Family Provider</i>	4.06	4.07	4.16	4.11
<i>Mouthpiece of Party</i>	4.06	4.01	4.23	3.85
<i>Messenger of Civilization</i>	3.47	3.46	3.42	3.39
<i>Humanitarian</i>	3.28	3.28	3.32	3.04
<i>Interest Group</i>	2.98	3.03	2.94	3.11
<i>Spokesperson</i>				

Source: Zhang and Su 2012

In practice, however, although journalists are imprisoned at higher rates than other types of media actors, imprisonment is still a relatively rare event. More common, but less well documented, is physical intimidation. Journalists are often roughed up by "unidentified attackers whose connections to the authorities are suspected rather than overt" (FH 2013). Indeed, in an indication of the impunity enjoyed by the authorities, local officials themselves may partake in acts of intimidation. The following anecdote is illustrative:

Two journalists from *New West* magazine were reportedly attacked by several officers and the director of the Department of Land and Resources as they investigated an illegal gold-mining operation in Weinan City. One of the journalists was reportedly punched in the head by the director, who told the pair, "Do we have to report to media about what are we doing? We have rights not to answer your questions. I could make you die today" (FH 2013).

Indeed, investigative journalists so frequently fear for their physical safety that one Chinese journalism school included self-defense as part of the curriculum (Zhang 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Note: Scores based on a five-point scale where 1 refers to "extremely disagree" and 5 refers to "extremely agree"

Far more common than acts of physical intimidation are accusations of defamation. In China, when local authorities or business interests are accused of wrongdoing in the media, they may—and often do—sue journalists for defamation. In 2004, for example, Chinese courts heard 5,195 defamation cases (Stockmann 2012). This is a particularly popular strategy at the local level, and since local judges are appointed by local Party members, it is difficult for journalists to get a fair hearing. According to Chinese lawyer, Pu Zhiqiang, “When officials and rich corporations file these cases, they usually win ... the media doesn’t have a chance” (CPJ 2007). Moreover, if serious enough, defamation can be considered a criminal charge. According to Article 246 of China’s Criminal Code, a civil case can be turned into a criminal case at the discretion of the presiding judge (NPC 1997).

In short, variation in the application of coercion or intimidation reveals that journalists are not all of a piece: they are neither equally vulnerable nor equally willing to take risks. Ethnic minorities tend to be penalized much more frequently for publishing material that is deemed to be subversive, reflecting the Party’s very serious concerns about secessionist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. Moreover, staff journalists are either less likely to risk imprisonment or are less vulnerable to such harsh measures than freelance journalists. Since print journalists are more likely to be freelancers, it is unsurprising that they are more frequent victims of coercion than their broadcast counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, modes of control in the print and broadcast ecologies share similarities that attend to their roles as bridge between the Party and the people. The political importance of news media

to the Party is itself a function of the social practice of news journalism, characterized by the capacity to report and interpret the events of the world on a day-by-day—and, increasingly, minute-by-minute—basis. In short, it is a political effect of a social practice made possible by a technology—originally, the printed word and moveable type. Moreover, the salience of news media to the Party reflects not only their perceived power, but also their inherent versatility. That is, just as easily as news media can project an image of the world that conforms with the Party's preferred narrative, their critical sights could be trained on the Party itself.

But control over either medium also reflects the peculiarities of the institutions and relationships that have grown around each technology, to wit, their respective information ecologies. The dilemma posed by news media—the precarious balance between threat and advantage—is magnified, in distinct ways in either ecology. In the case of broadcast media, the dilemma is magnified by the ubiquity of television in Chinese homes, but tempered by the centralization of broadcasting institutions and the dependence of broadcast journalists. In the case of print media, the threat of a decentralized publishing industry, an increasingly autonomous corps of journalists, and a market that incentivizes risk-taking is tempered by a limited audience and the willingness of the state to make—and make good on—threats to the livelihoods of editors and journalists.

Throughout this dissertation, I have made the argument that state attempts to resolve the dilemma of state power, in general, and the CCP's attempts to manage political speech, in particular, cannot simply be reduced to social, economic, or even political factors. Rather, in order to account for variation in modes of control over media, one must take a holistic approach, focusing on what I have called the information ecology. One must disaggregate media into the political, administrative, social, and economic relationships that shape how the technology is



employed. As I have shown in this chapter, news media have a significant political salience to the CCP, and one cannot divorce this fact from one's analysis of media. That is, one cannot, as is often done, analyze the effect of media technology divorced from their social and political context any more than one can ignore the economic constraints and opportunities afforded by variations in media technology. But neither can one divorce analysis from the institutions, actors, and relationships that both tie each media ecology to each other and, in concert, make each ecology unique.

I note these things at the end of this chapter because, as I will argue in the next, modes of control over the traditional media ecologies offer insights into how states can and will manage speech within new media ecologies. Digital media have opened new opportunities for political actors and have posed new constraints. Nevertheless, I will argue, these opportunities and constraints are not of qualitatively new types, nor have repertoires of control been fashioned out of whole cloth. Instead, they conform to a similar logic, one that reflects the fact that media technology shape human relations of communication along three fundamental dimensions: sovereign, vertical, and temporal.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA ECOLOGY

As are each of the traditional media analyzed thus far, so too are new media inherently versatile means of social power. New media, broadly defined as digital computers that can connect to the Internet, enable citizens to access and to communicate information that may either be a boon or a threat to national interests. Just as new media enable users to access information about news, history, and weather, to trade goods, or to learn how to do home repairs, they also allow users to access child pornography, to trade in contraband, or to learn how to build homemade weapons. The interests of states to make these tools available to ever wider segments of the population must, therefore, be balanced against the dangers posed by those who would use new media to threaten national interests.

That such a dilemma exists in China is suggested by simultaneous state efforts to expand access to new media and to reign in its threats. On the one hand, comprehensive improvement of China's information technology (IT) infrastructure has been elevated to the level of a national development goal in China's 12<sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan, backed by billions of dollars in state subsidies. In 2014, for example, Beijing invested \$193 billion in fiber optic broadband in major cities and 4G networks in rural areas, in order to "unleash the creativity of hundreds of millions of people - and keep China's economy competitive" (Hewitt 2015). On the other hand, intermittent campaigns to rid the Internet of pornography and "false rumors" reveal the pains that must be taken to balance the state's goals of socio-economic and political control. Moreover, these campaigns suggest that, in a one-party state, such as the PRC, the threats posed by new media are not limited to pornography and illicit trade, but also include the communication of political speech.

New media in general, and social media in particular, are archetypically versatile means of social power. Thus, rather than posing an essentially new challenge to states, new media exacerbate the dilemma of state power, and complicate the kinds of responses available to states seeking to manage political speech. Social media offer users radically privatized, diffuse, and autonomous forms of social capacity, to wit, the ability to author, publish, and to consume information. They are, in crucial ways, therefore, resistant to direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of state control. However, as I have argued in the preceding chapters, media are not merely technologies, but rather the relationships of communication made possible by technology. Thus, even though social media render the capacity to produce, distribute, and consume information more private, diffuse, and autonomous, nonetheless there are actors and capacities within the social media ecology that remain, or have been rendered, public, concentrated, or dependent. In its effort to manage political speech online, the state attempts to manufacture these qualities of social capacity where it can, and where it cannot, it must avail itself of relatively indirect, decentralized, and retroactive forms of control. The result is a suite of control strategies that, on their surface, appear novel, but which share distinct similarities with repertoires of control over traditional forms of media.

### **The Internet, New Media, and Social Media**

In this chapter, my focus is on new media and, in particular, on how various forms of new media are augmented by technical applications commonly referred to as social media. In this section, I define new media and social media in order to differentiate them from the traditional media analyzed thus far. In short, I argue that the political potential of new media was latent until the

emergence of what are known as Web 2.0 applications, which have made possible the radical diffusion of productive media capacity that Yochai Benkler associated with the networked information economy. However, social media are not limited to web applications and are increasingly designed for primary or exclusive use on mobile phones, further enhancing the autonomy with which end-users may employ them.

### *New Media*

New media may be distinguished by two qualities: they are digital computers that can connect to a distributed network of computers, namely, the Internet. New media are, first, digital as opposed to analog machines. Analog machines are said to record data, “as they are,” by manipulating continuously variable physical quantities that are analogues of the quantities being represented. A thermometer, for example, measures the temperature by responding to changes in the physical environment and representing them in a physical change to the mercury it encases; a tape recorder takes a sound wave from a microphone and “copies” it onto tape, producing an actual, physical facsimile, an artifact.

In contrast, new media are digital computers, i.e., machines that can process and store digital data. Digital data are represented by a series of discrete values in binary form, such as “on” or “off,” 0 or 1. In effect, digital data are a series of answers to yes/no questions, a series of instructions to a machine that can process them rapidly: a computer.<sup>20</sup> The fact that digital data

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<sup>20</sup> To understand just how fast computer processors are, and just how cheap computer storage is, consider the following: every 1/0 (yes/no) possibility can be contained in one “bit,” and there are 8 bits in a “byte.” Thus, in one byte, there are 256 (i.e.,  $2^8$ ) possible combinations of 1 and 0. There are 1024 Bytes in one Kilobyte (KB); 1024 Kilobytes in one Megabyte (MB); and 1024 Megabytes in one Gigabyte (GB). In a single GB, therefore, there are 8,589,934,592 bits or  $2^{28}$  possible combinations of 1 and 0. As of June, 2016, a flash drive with 8GB of storage costs \$8.99 at Staples; a flash drive with 64GB of storage costs \$29.99.

are represented by discrete values allows the data to be broken apart into many smaller pieces, sent elsewhere and reassembled when they arrive at their destination, and as long as the number and sequence of binary states are known, the data are never corrupted.

This quality of digital data—discreteness—makes possible the second component of new media: communication via a distributed network. In a distributed network of digital computers, such as the Internet, data are exchanged almost exclusively through what is called a client-server model. Servers are those computers that provide resources or services to other computers, and clients are those computers that make requests for resources or services. Clients are distinguished by the fact that they do not share any of their resources. In a client-server model, data are requested by a client and returned (or otherwise directed) by various servers. Because data transmitted over the Internet are discrete, they can be broken into smaller pieces and sent separately to their destinations. Thus, when a client computer sends a request for data, a server computer fulfills that request by sending multiple “packets” of data back to the client where they are reassembled as interpretable information: an image, an audio file, or a document, for example. How each packet of data finds its way to its destination, what happens when data are lost along the way, how the packets get reassembled correctly—these are all made possible by what are called protocols: sets of rules that govern what machines operating on the network will do when they come in contact with packets of data.

As I described in Chapter 1, the Internet was originally intended as a communications infrastructure for the US military, designed to be capable of withstanding a coordinated attack by a foreign adversary. To this end, the predecessor of the Internet—DARPA<sup>21</sup>—utilized packet-switching protocols so that if any node in the network were to be destroyed, packets of

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<sup>21</sup> Named after the agency where it was developed, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

data would still make their ways to their destinations: the network would simply reroute them along any number of alternative paths. Thus, rather than information flowing downstream from the most central to the most peripheral, any node—any computer—may establish a connection with any other node on the network (see: chapter 1). This is made possible also by what is called the “end-to-end” principle, which states that all functionality should be performed by applications connected to the Internet, and not by the Internet itself. The Internet is, thus, “neutral,” exclusively concerned, as it were, with transmitting information as efficiently as possible. It is unconcerned with the content of that information, or the physical location or identities of end users (either the client requesting information or the server hosting information).

The Internet is, therefore, an infrastructure, a utility.<sup>22</sup> Without applications built on top of this infrastructure, the Internet would be rather impenetrable to the average end user, just as personal computers running the Data Operating System (DOS) were prior to the introduction of Microsoft Windows. The social functions of the Internet were, thus, originally limited to a small community of academic researchers who used the infrastructure to share information among themselves. The real promise of the distributed network remained latent until the early 1990s, when a new set of applications known as the World Wide Web would render the Internet more user-friendly.

### *Social Media*

Social media, a subset of new media, are applications that allow users to generate and share content in public fora of varying sizes (Van Looy 2016). Social media emerged first on what is

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the D.C. Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) categorization of Internet Service Providers as public utilities.

known as the World Wide Web. This system of “hyper-linked” web pages is not, as is commonly assumed, the Internet. Rather, the Web sits atop the Internet infrastructure, acting as an interface between data hosted on servers and individual end-users (clients) who make requests for data. The Web connects these various data through a chain—a “web”—of hyperlinks: highlighted words or images on the screen which, when activated by a mouse click, connect a user to other resources such as files, documents, web pages. But the World Wide Web was not designed to be interactive. That is, in its original manifestation, a website author might publish information to a webpage, which anyone could view, but the page would only communicate information in a single direction: from author to audience. A website author could add or alter information contained on any page on the website, but viewers of the page had no control over the page’s content. Thus, although the Internet did, in theory, allow multi-directional communication, in practice, such communication was limited either to email or to a very small community of chat room users. In contrast, the emergent World Wide Web, while significantly lowering barriers to publication for would-be authors, acted very much like traditional media: a relatively small group of authors could create and publish content that was consumable by a relatively large, but passive audience.

The truly social applications of the Internet were only made manifest in what has been described as the transition from the non-interactive Web 1.0 to the interactive Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005). Advances in the processing and storage capacities of computers and in the carrying capacity of Internet’s physical infrastructure (e.g., broadband and fiber optic cables) enabled the emergence of Web 2.0 applications—websites with interactive functionality. Web 2.0 applications, such as Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, or EBay, serve as platforms whose primary function is to host and facilitate the communication of information generated by end users. These

data are stored, retrieved, and processed by warehoused servers known collectively as “the cloud.” Whereas, in the past, one would actually download email onto one’s computer, on cloud-based Web 2.0 email services, such as Google’s Gmail, both the application (i.e., the service or platform) and the content (e.g., one’s email) are hosted entirely online on Google’s servers.

This feature enables Web 2.0 application service providers (ASPs) to take advantage of economies of scale—effectively buying or renting, and operating bulk-rate processing and storage capacity—and to pass these savings on to end-users who do not consume media as content, but rather, media as platform. That is, what the ASP provides and what the user consumes is a resource that enables the end-user to exercise social capacity: to author, to publish, to distribute, or to consume media content. End-users are simultaneously producers and consumers, or, to use a term coined by Alvin Toffler, “prosumers” (Toffler 1981). But neither the user-generated content (UGC) nor the platform itself is stored on an individual’s computer, and in order to access both the platform and the content, one must have access to the Internet.

Social media, then, are applications that enable users to create and share content in public fora of varying sizes (Van Looy 2016). A social media company is, thus, not itself, necessarily, a content creator. Rather, it offers a platform for a diffuse base of content creators who are themselves the consumers and distributors of potentially mass mediated content. The value of a social media application is, therefore, a function of the number of people who use it—the size of the network—which is, in turn, a rough gauge of the potential audience of any social media post.

There is considerable overlap between social media and other forms of Web 2.0 media. For example, a news website might not primarily publish UGC, but insofar as each comment section allows users to share their ideas, they nevertheless constitute public fora for UGC, however limited. Although social media must allow UGC, much of what is shared via social



media is content created first within the traditional media ecologies: newspaper articles or clips from television, for example. Moreover, most applications that are rightly called social media now allow users to limit the posts that others outside of their networks can view.

Social media is, therefore, a concept with quite fuzzy boundaries. Indeed, as more applications are developed that make use of the Internet, it becomes difficult to pin social media down as a concept. For example, one of the most popular applications in China is called WeChat, which allows users to send messages (and links to other media) to groups of friends via a mobile phone. WeChat is not a web application; it is a mobile application, designed exclusively for use on a mobile device. Nevertheless, aside from the fact that one cannot access the application via a standard computer connected to the Web, it functions much like a web-based social media application: it utilizes a computer and the infrastructure of the Internet to allow users to create and share content with audiences of varying size, and these audiences can, in turn, share this content with other audiences.

For the purposes of this dissertation, then, I will use a slightly more expansive definition of social media than is customary. Social media, I argue, are new media that:

1. Allow user-generated content
2. Allow user-controlled distribution (sharing or reposting)
3. Allow distribution to relatively large (if not, technically, public) audiences
4. Allow audiences the technical capacity to redistribute (share or re-post) content

*Economy vs. Ecology*

At this point, it will be useful to revisit my point of departure from Yochai Benkler: the distinction made between industrial and networked information economies. According to Benkler, what is novel about the networked information economy is the fact that access to capital does not represent a steep barrier to the production or distribution of media content. In contrast to an industrial information economy, within which consumptive capacity is nearly ubiquitous, but productive and distributive capacities are concentrated in large organizations, in a networked information economy, access to consumptive capacity is coextensive with access to productive and distributive capacity. Web applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, and YouTube, therefore, are not merely analogs to the *New York Times*, CBS, Encyclopedia Britannica, or Warner Brothers. They are, instead, different models of production, distribution, and consumption—or, in Benkler's terms, actors within a qualitatively different type of information economy.

According to Benkler, then, what distinguishes the networked information economy from the traditional or industrial information economies is that productive capital, represented by a personal computer or a smartphone, is radically diffused throughout society. I depart from Benkler in two important respects that guide the following analysis. First, I have argued that the concentration or diffusion of means of social power is not merely related to access to capital, but is also, in important ways, affected by social, administrative, and political barriers. It is this conclusion that has led me to adapt his concept of the information economy into the information (or media) ecology. Second, whereas Benkler's stress was on the diffusion of access to productive means, I have argued that it is also important to consider the nature of authority over

social capacity, as well as the autonomy with which it may be used. Within the social media ecology, these latter two qualities—the authority and autonomy over the use of means of social power—are very much bound up with the first—access to means of social power. However, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, they are indeed distinct features affecting various elements of the information ecology differently. Therefore, they cannot be taken for granted. In the next section, I will demonstrate how each of these departures from Benkler inform an ecological conceptualization of social media and, in turn, constrain state strategies to manage political speech through new and social media.

### **The Social Media Ecology**

In each traditional media ecology there is a clearly demarcated group of individuals and institutions responsible for supplying—authoring, producing, or distributing—content to another group of individuals who exist almost exclusively as consumers. As can be gleaned from the above, however, this is decidedly not so in the social media ecology. In the social media ecology, the capacity to author and to share content is built into the platforms of social media applications. Indeed, the very vitality of these applications depends on the fact that consumers are also, at least potentially, the authors and distributors of media content. It is, therefore, not practical to discuss author-producers, distributors, and consumers of social media content as distinct groups.

Nevertheless, to say that each end-user has the potential to author and distribute content is not to say that each user is equally likely to be an author or a distributor of mass mediated content. On the one hand, a user's network may be extremely limited and, thus, even were he to author and share content continuously throughout the day, it would be a stretch to speak of his

production as “mass” mediated content. Reflecting the range of networks, for example, pop music star Katy Perry has approximately 90,000,000 followers on the microblogging platform Twitter, but the average number of followers is about 200 (Twitaholic 2016). If by chance Katy Perry were to read a post by an average user and then share it, that single post might have an audience of 90,000,000 people, though that user’s network size might not increase by very much. On the other hand, as I have argued in the introductory chapter, the nature of productivity conforms to what has been called a “long tail” distribution, wherein there are relatively few authors who post with high frequency, but the overriding majority of authors post infrequently. Thus, to say that one cannot, in practice, separate social media users into author-producers, distributors, and consumers is not to say that all social media users are the same with regard to those activities. Indeed, each of these factors—variation in user network size and variation in user activity—will be shown to be relevant to the state’s strategy of control in the social media ecology. Suffice it to say now, however, that although these statistics are revealing, neither the number of Internet users nor the number of social media users is a precise measure of the number of individuals who regularly produce mass mediated content, and to speak of a radical diffusion of social capacity is, more accurately, to speak of a latent potential.

Lastly, it cannot be ignored that, despite the privatization, diffusion, and autonomization of productive and distributive capacity engendered by the development of social media applications, end-users are still dependent on external organizations for access to both the Internet and to the platforms themselves. This is a central fact that is obscured by a preponderance of analyses that narrowly focus on how social media empower individuals vis-à-vis organizations. Indeed, it will be shown that service- and platform-providing organizations play an essential role in the state’s strategy for exercising control over speech in the social media

ecology. In what follows, therefore, I will employ several complementary statistics that will reveal the nature of both the individuals and the organizations that together constitute the social media ecology.

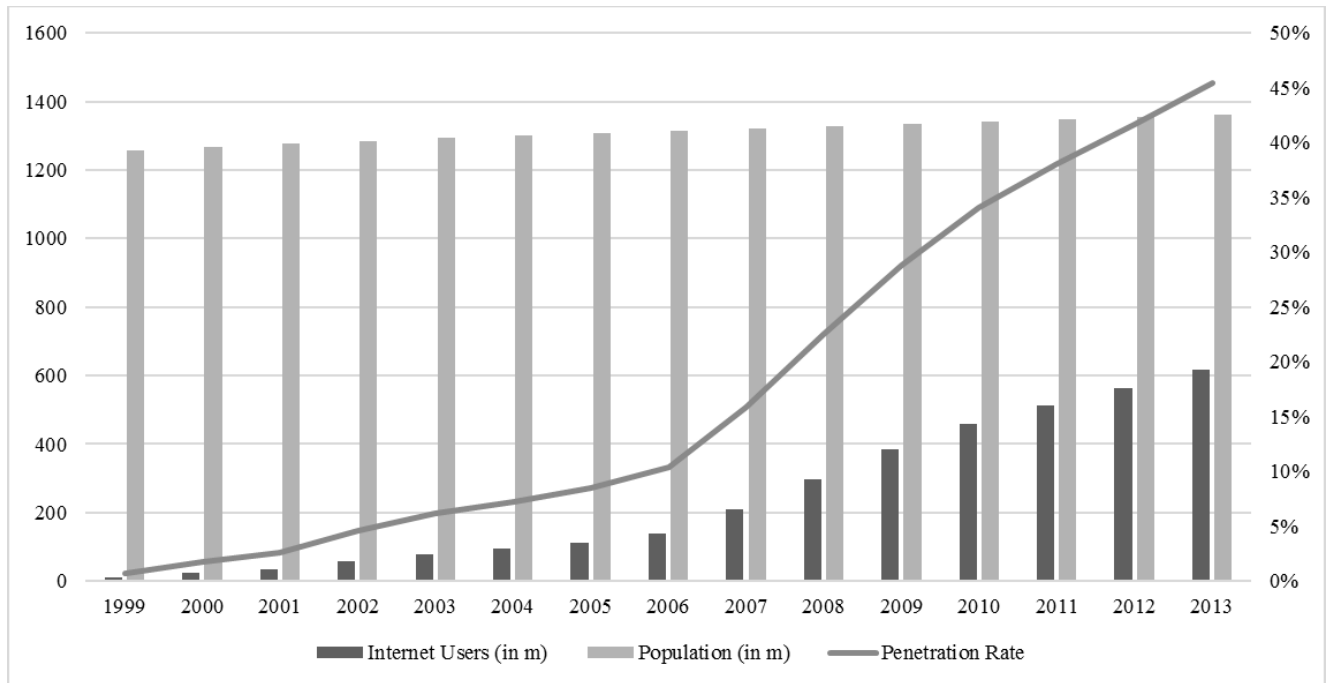
### *Individuals: Social Media End-Users*

Social media are a subset of new media and, as such, they require two things for their use: access to a digital computer and access to the Internet. In 1997, the first year that the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC<sup>23</sup>) began keeping such statistics, there were 620,000 Internet users in all of China (CNNIC 2014). Less than 20 years later, China's Internet penetration rate—the percentage of the total population that can access the Internet—has grown dramatically (Figure 1). By the end of 2013, China's Internet population had multiplied a thousandfold to 618 million users, representing about 45% of the total Chinese population and approximately 23% of the world's total users (CNNIC 2015).

Of course, access to the Internet is not nearly as ubiquitous as, for example, television access in China: China's TV coverage rate stood at 98.2% by the end of 2012, and by the end of 2013, China's Internet penetration rate was less than half of that, at 45% (NBS 2013; 2014). Moreover, reflecting what has become known as the “digital divide,” there is rather stark regional variation in access to the Internet. As Figure 2 shows, the penetration rate in China's urban areas is more than twice that of China's rural areas.

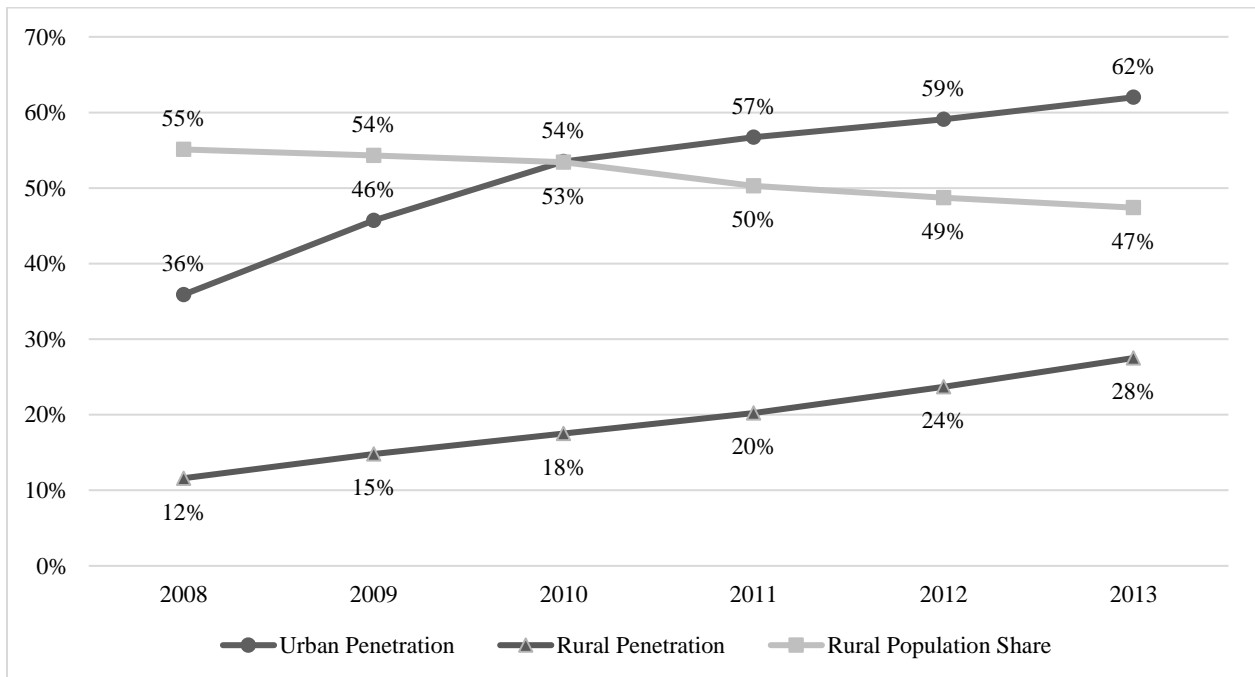
<sup>23</sup> “CNNIC is the official acronym, not CINIC, as the English logo is designed such that the characters ‘NN’ are drawn together to represent the Chinese character 互, which is used in the Chinese word for Internet” (Aston 2015).

**Figure 7.1. Growth of the Internet in China, 1999 – 2013**



Source: China National Bureau of Statistics (2014)

**Figure 7.2. Internet penetration by urban and rural region (in %)**



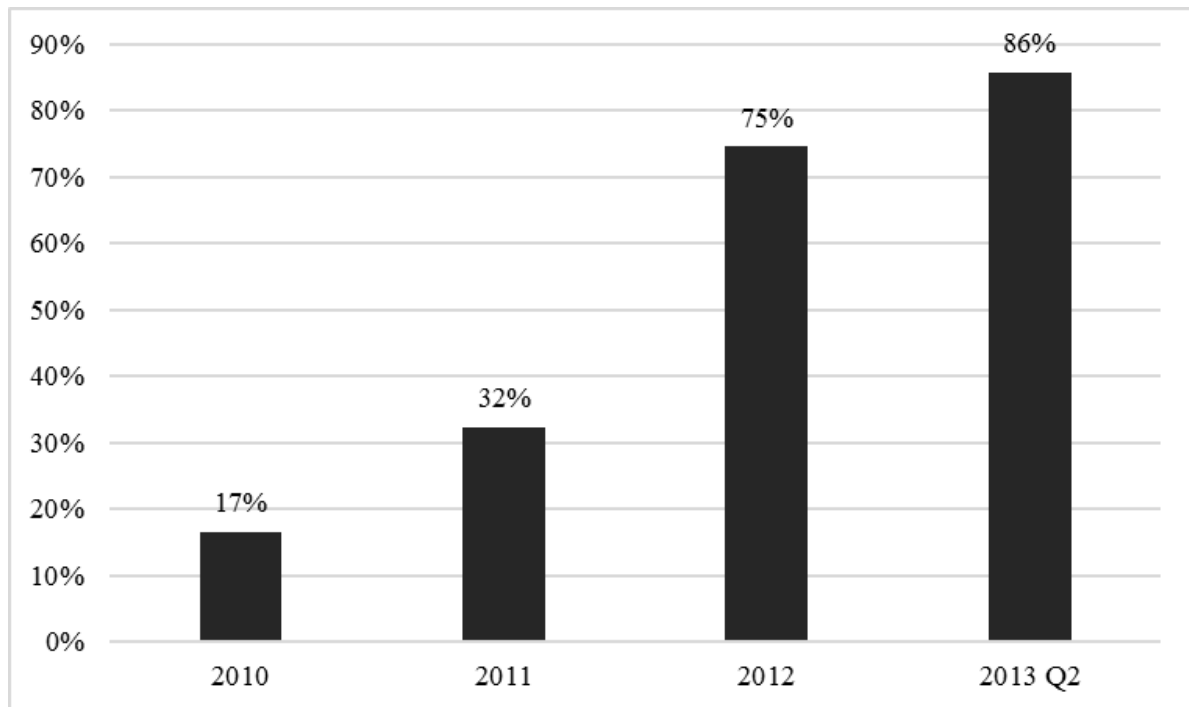
Source: CNNIC 2014

Notwithstanding these statistics, however, the trend in the Internet's development is clear: access to the Internet in China is expanding rapidly. Between 2008 and 2013, China's total Internet penetration rate more than doubled and its rural penetration rate trebled. This reflects not only the fact that China's population is becoming less rural (see Fig. 2), but also the fact that Beijing has taken on an active role in investing in the development of China's Internet infrastructure, especially in China's rural regions. Between 1997 and 2009, China invested a total of 4.3 trillion yuan (630 billion USD) in Internet infrastructure construction, and an entire chapter in China's 12<sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan (2011 – 2015) was dedicated to the “comprehensive improvement of informatization,” and included such priorities as the construction of new generation mobile communication networks, an ultra-high-speed and high-capacity backbone transmission network, and an acceleration of broadband network construction in rural areas (Xinhua 2010); NPC 2011). In 2013, the State Council and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) issued the "Broadband China" Strategy and Implementation Plan, which sets development goals and a development schedule for broadband network development but, more importantly, identifies the broadband network as a “strategic public infrastructure” essential to China's “economic and social development” (CNNIC 2014, p. 95). These goals are not merely lip service either: in 2015, the state invested \$193 billion in fiber optic broadband in major cities and in 4G networks in rural areas in order to “unleash the creativity of hundreds of millions of people—and keep China's economy competitive” (Hewitt 2015).

Another reason for rapidly expanding Internet access is that investment in China's wired and mobile broadband infrastructure has gone hand in hand with decreases in the cost of mobile phone handsets. According to market research company EMarketer, “the rise of cheap,

domestically produced devices combined with escalating disposable income and faster broadband speeds is fueling China's rapidly growing smartphone market" (EMarketer 2014). Today in China, the average price of a smartphone from a domestic manufacturer is CNY 935 (USD 150) (GSMA 2015). Consequently, the number of smart phone users has grown rapidly in recent years, as has the share of smart phone users as a percentage of all mobile phone users (Figures 3 and 4). EMarketer projects that there will be 184 million new smartphone users in China between 2014 and 2018, resulting in an increase in the smartphone user base from 38.3% to 51.1% of the total population (EMarketer 2014). Indeed, when Chinese citizens access the Internet, they are most likely to do so via a mobile phone. In 2013, there were 500 million mobile Internet users in China, representing a year-over-year increase of 80.1 million, and 81% of users accessed the Internet via mobile broadband in 2013 (Figs. 4 and 5).

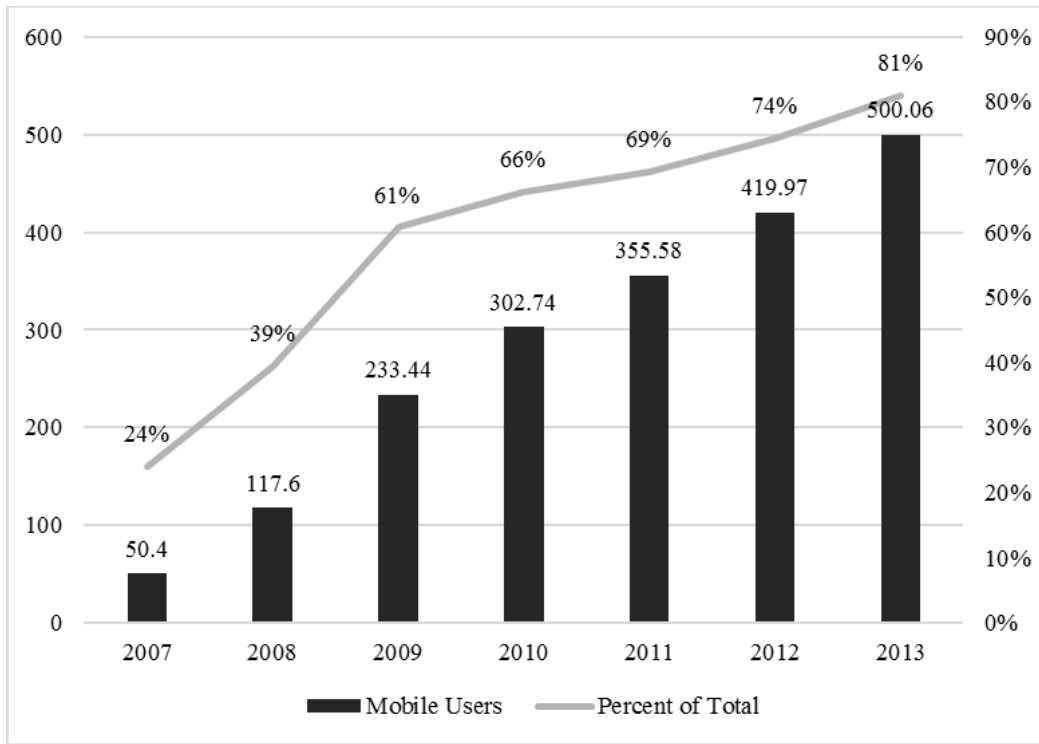
**Figure 7.3. Share of Smartphones in the Total Sales Volume of Mobile Phones**



Source: Sino Market Research (2013)

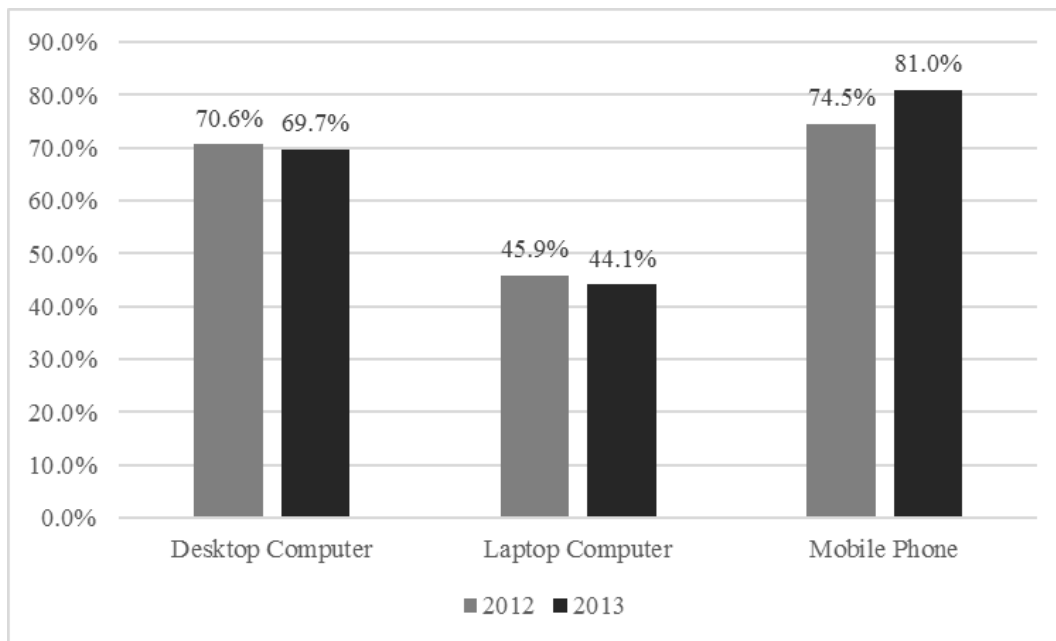


**Figure 7.4. Number of Mobile Phone Internet Users by Year**



Source: CNNIC 2014

**Figure 7.5. Internet Access by Device Type**



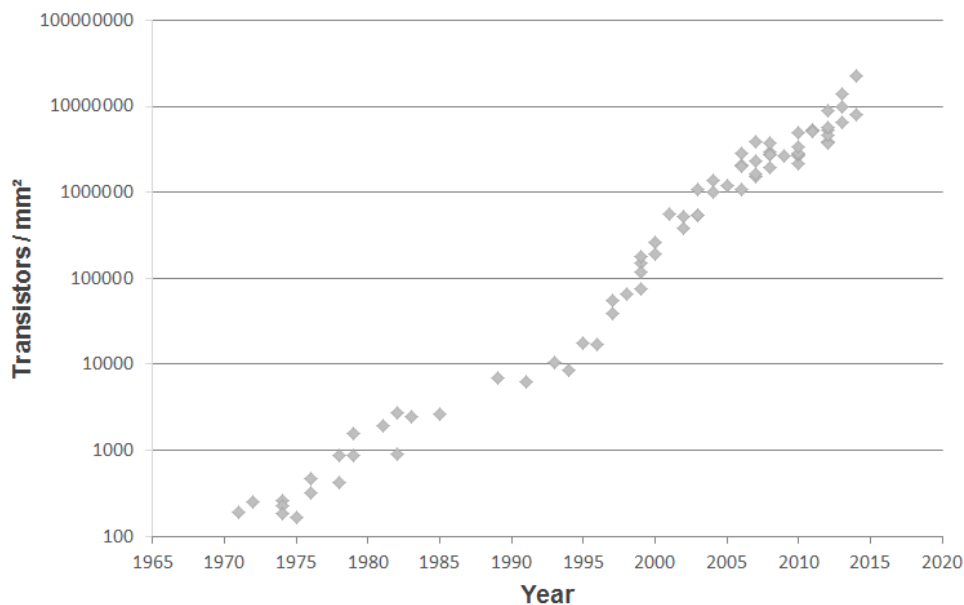
Source: CNNIC 2014

In short, new media access is on the rise in China, the result of expanded access to both digital computers and to the Internet. In terms of the former, lower costs of productive capital are indeed responsible for the diffusion of social capacity: the decreased cost of smartphones has made access to personal digital computers a reality for a growing number of Chinese citizens. However, capital costs are not the only factors at play and, in China's case, politics are an equally important explanation for the diffusion of social capacity. By designating the expansion of Internet access a national development goal, and supporting this goal with billions of dollars in investment, the Chinese party-state is directly involved in the expansion of access to critical infrastructure, without which such productive capital would remain idle.

All of the above help to explain the increasing diffusion of access to new media. However, in terms of the framework adopted in this dissertation, of equal consequence is the fact that computers—and smartphones in particular—are personal items. That is, just as decreases in the cost of both computers and Internet access have made new media available to greater numbers of Chinese citizens, they have also made them available for private ownership and use. Not only is it increasingly within the means of Chinese citizens to purchase and own computers, especially in the form of smartphones, but it is also legally permissible for them to do so. Indeed, as I have argued, reflecting the dilemma of state power, the Chinese government has a dedicated interest in enabling private citizens to use these tools—in order to contact government offices, to learn new skills, to conduct business, or to seek out entertainment. In short, the computers that make social media possible are considered essential social power resources. There is, therefore, little chance of the state trying to expropriate these tools into state hands nor, given the fact that these are “new” media, has the state inherited such authority from its communist past.

But advances in computer technology have not simply increased the number of citizens who can, in their private capacity, utilize new media. They have also increased the autonomy with which individuals may employ such media. This fact is not unrelated to the diffusion of computer access: reductions in the cost of computers are due in large part to the fact that computers have become both significantly faster and smaller. Indeed, exponential growth in computer processing power has been so consistent over the past 40 years that it has been described in terms of a law. Moore's Law states that transistor density—an indirect measure of computer processing power—doubles every two years. This rule has proven remarkably reliable, as Figure 6 illustrates below (Moore 1965; 1975). Corresponding improvements have also been observed in terms of the size, cost, density, and speed of computer components. Kryder's Law, for example, predicts that storage capacity will increase at a rate even faster than that of processing capacity: doubling every 18 months.

**Figure 7.6. Maximum Transistor Density (in  $\text{mm}^2$ ) by Year**



Source: Pavelich 2014

The result of these advances is that it is increasingly within the means of citizens, not only to own powerful computers, but also to walk around with them in their pockets. Moreover, as wireless network infrastructure is developed, Chinese citizens can connect to the Internet—and to social media—when and where they want to. Thus, for those Chinese citizens who access the Internet via a smartphone, there are very few barriers preventing them from authoring or sharing content at their whim.

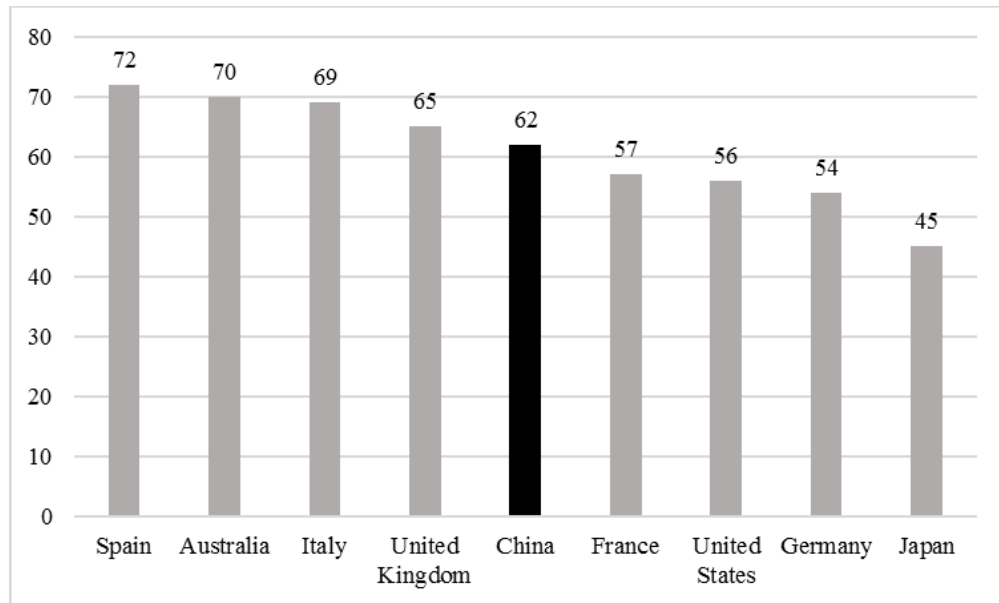
A consequence of the above is that Chinese citizens spend increasing amounts of time with new media in general, and with various forms of social media in particular. For those with access to the Internet, new media overtook television as the medium with which the average Chinese adult spent the most time in 2014, and projections are that by 2017 Chinese consumers will spend about as much time with smartphones alone as they do with television (Table 1). Moreover, of those Chinese citizens who did go online in 2013, 62% of them were social media users and, reflecting the size of China's overall Internet user population, China boasts the world's largest social media user base (Figs. 7.7 and 7.8).

**Table 7.1. Average Daily Time Spent with Media Among Consumers in China, 2011-2017 (in minutes)**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<i>Internet</i>	81.8	86.9	116	<b>142.6</b>	166.3	186.9	202.1
— <i>Mobile</i>	na	32.7	46	64.4	87	102.4	<b>116.1</b>
— <i>Desktop</i>	na	54.2	70.1	78.2	79.3	84.5	86
<i>TV</i>	166.2	153.7	144.1	<b>139.4</b>	131.1	125.9	<b>124.6</b>
<i>Newspapers</i>	23.1	18.2	15.8	14.2	13	12.2	11.7
<i>Radio</i>	11.2	9.6	7.4	8.4	8.3	8.1	7.9
<i>Magazines</i>	4.2	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.1	2.9	2.9

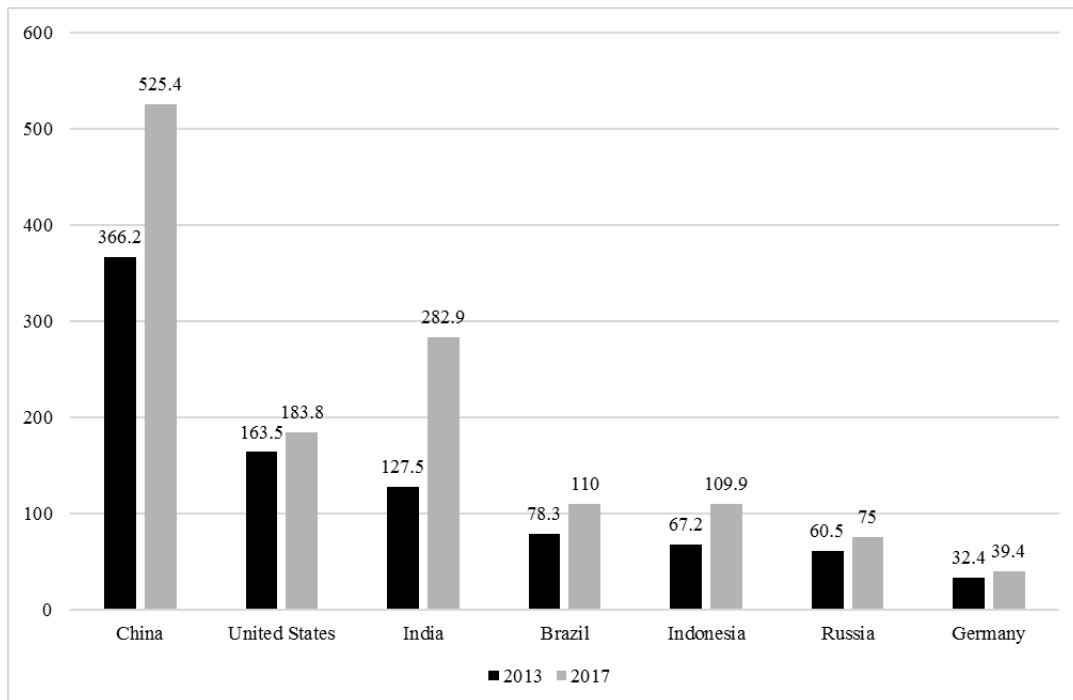
Source: CMMS 2015; \*2015 – 2017 projected

**Figure 7.7. Weekly Social Media Site Access,<sup>24</sup> 2013 (Share of Respondents)**



Source: Ofcom 2013

**Figure 7.8. Number and Projected Number of Social Network Users (Millions)**



Source: EMarketer 2013

<sup>24</sup> Q: Which, if any, of the following activities do you use your internet connection for at least once a week?

In sum, access to social media increases each year and with it also the opportunity for ordinary Chinese citizens to autonomously generate media content capable of consumption by a large audience. For this reason, it is often argued that social media are resistant to state control, posing a dilemma for would-be censors. However, in terms of the framework proposed here, social media are resistant to direct, centralized, and preemptive forms of state control, but not state control as such. Moreover, as I will show next, end-users are only a part of the social media ecology—a critical part, no doubt—but they do not constitute the social media ecology *en toto*.

### *Organizations*

Despite the potential unleashed by social media, one would be remiss to paint a picture of the social media ecology that ignores the role of organizations such as, for example, the companies that provide Internet service to individual consumers or those that design and operate social media or other web applications. When one speaks of the diffusion or the autonomy of productive capacity enabled by social media, one is technically speaking of a diffusion of access to the Internet and to computers. However, this obscures the fact that access to the Internet as well as to any social media application depends on a gatekeeper of some kind: at the very least, one depends on an Internet service provider and, for many, also on the rental of a computer. From the perspective of the state, this is no small detail. When compared with individual end users, organizations such as telecommunications operators, Internet service providers, application service providers—even Internet café owners—represent a relatively concentrated group of actors with widely varying degrees of authority and autonomy over their own respective social capacities. None of these actors, of course, are involved in the authorship, production,

publication, or distribution of content: such capacities reside with individual end users. Taken together, however, these organizations provide the infrastructure and the platforms without which diffuse, private, and autonomous social capacity would be impossible.

As I have described above, the Internet operates on the basis of a client-server model in which data are requested over the network by a client and either returned by a server hosting the data or directed (“routed”) by various intermediary servers on the network. The Internet is essentially a patchwork of local networks of clients and servers such as these—a “network of networks,” it is often said. If one imagines the Internet as an interstate road map, one town’s system of streets and roads would be analogous to a local network: it connects houses (clients) with other houses and businesses (servers). This town (local network) is connected to another town via a highway—what would be called a “backbone” in the network analogue—and tolls, traffic lights, and signs (“network routers”) direct traffic: an otherwise autonomous and diffuse group of private vehicle operators. In these terms, what would be notable about the map in China is that the state owns and operates much of the infrastructure—certainly the interstate highways and the tolls—and leases them to private organizations who are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the nation’s transit system.

In China, the physical infrastructure of the Internet is effectively owned by three state-run telecommunications enterprises: China Telecom, China Unicom, and China Mobile. These three organizations lease state-owned network infrastructure to backbone network operators who, in turn, lease network access to China’s application service providers (Harwit 2008, p. 91). In 2013, there were 27,352 application service providers (ASPs) of varying size offering services such as “online advertising, web portals, search engines, instant messaging, internet games, blogs, business-to-business (B2B) services and consumer to consumer (C2C) e-commerce” (IBIS

2014). In addition, another 1,337 enterprises were categorized as social networking application providers (IBIS 2014). Each of these will depend, either directly or indirectly, on China's state-owned telecoms for access to the Internet. China's three national telecoms are also far and away the dominant providers of basic Internet service (ISPs), either renting wholesale access to organizations, such as ASPs and Internet cafés, or retail access to individual end-users. In 2013 (Q4), their combined market share for service provision was 93.4% (French 2014).

Despite the theoretically distributed or decentralized nature of the Internet, then, in China there exists a practical hierarchy of authority over Internet infrastructure. This hierarchy is reinforced by the fact that all international traffic enters China through only three Internet exchange points—the physical nodes through which operators route traffic—located in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Hanson 2015). In addition to these “national level” exchange points, each of which is connected to the other, five “core” nodes are connected to one or two national nodes, comprising the central network through which all non-local Chinese traffic must pass. To reuse the transit analogy, this infrastructure comprises China's interstate “information superhighway,” connecting local area networks (LANs) to China's national Internet and the global Internet as well.

In short, the physical infrastructure of the Internet is a publicly owned and effectively monopolized social power resource upon which any individual end-user or organization intending to utilize the Internet is dependent. As I will argue below, this is a central feature of the Chinese state's efforts to control speech in the new and social media ecology.



## Control

Perhaps more than in any of the traditional media ecologies, the management of speech in the social media ecology operates on multiple levels, each exhibiting the varying degrees of authority, access, and autonomy over social capacity in the social media ecology. In order to reflect this multi-level approach to control, the following analysis is loosely organized according to the client-server-network model that I have described above. According to this scheme, there are three basic loci of control, three points at which the state can interfere with the flow of media content: control can be exercised over clients or end-users; over servers or service providers; or over the network infrastructure itself.

What follows is by no means an exhaustive survey of modes of control that obtain within China's social media ecology. Rather, the analysis is meant to demonstrate that within each of these spheres, state efforts to exercise control reflect varying degrees of the privatization, diffusion, and autonomy of social capacity. As I have shown above, a wide range of variation along each of these dimensions exists between individual end-users and the organizations that own and operate the infrastructure necessary to employ new media. As I will now demonstrate, quite stark variation also obtains between these spheres in terms of the qualities of state efforts at control.

### *Network-level Control*

Perhaps the most studied element of China's control regime is what has come to be known as "the Great Firewall," a set of tools that, in theory, allows the state to control what information

can be accessed on the Internet in China. This effect is achieved primarily by “filtering” content on the Internet: that is, by denying or otherwise obstructing access to data, resources, or services hosted on the Internet. It is well documented that the Chinese state expends significant resources in order to filter content that it deems illicit, and the Great Firewall—known formally as the “Golden Shield”—has been described as the “most sophisticated” internet filtration system in the world (Deibert, et al. 2008; Talbot 2009a; Roberts, et al 2009). However, in terms of the framework adopted here, the technical sophistication of the Great Firewall is not its most salient feature. Instead, what is significant about the Great Firewall is suggested by its very name—it relies on the fact that the physical infrastructure of the Internet within China’s borders is subject to the sovereign authority of the Chinese state. By monopolizing the authority over a densely concentrated resource such as China’s national-level Internet exchange points, the state can exercise direct and centralized, if not entirely preemptive, forms of control over international traffic coming across China’s borders and, indeed, much of its own domestic traffic.

In practice, filtering data on either client computers or servers is inefficient (Roberts, et al. 2009). On the one hand, there are far more clients than there are servers or routers on any given network and, thus, it would take significantly greater administrative efforts to ensure that every computer came equipped with—and retained—its own filter. This hypothesis seems to have been confirmed by the state’s failed “Green Dam” project. In 2009, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) mandated that all PCs sold in China must come with a filtration software program called the “Green Dam Youth Escort” pre-installed (Faris, et al. 2009). However, as individual users have the capacity to tinker with their own computers, many were able to de-install the pre-packaged filters—or to hire someone else to do it—with relative

ease. Soon afterwards, installation of the software was re-categorized as optional, and by 2010, the program had folded up altogether (BBC 2010).

On the other hand, server-side filtering, which requires either the removal of content on servers or the obstruction of responses from the server to the client, has significant obstacles of its own. Foremost among these is the fact that many of the servers hosting requested data are housed in foreign countries and are, therefore, outside the authority of the Chinese state. For example, the party-state has little control over content hosted on the servers of the *New York Times*. Thus, the autonomy of individual end-users over their personal computers as well as that of foreign organizations over their servers are obstacles that make both client- and server-side filtering impractical goals.

In contrast to an end-user's personal computer or to the servers owned by foreign application providers—effectively, peripheral nodes on the network—the three national-level and five “core” Internet exchange points are densely concentrated and publicly controlled assets. Moreover, they are backbone routers through which all data coming into China must pass. Indeed, all data other than strictly regionally exchanged data must pass either through one of these three routers or through one of the five core-level nodes in order just to travel around China. This infrastructure is, therefore, an extremely densely concentrated capacity over which three state-owned corporations have exclusive authority. Thus, in terms of filtering content, the most efficient intervention is at the network level (Roberts, et al. 2009).

Network filtering is generally executed in one of three ways, each of which exploits the fact that data are transmitted over the Internet via “packets,” requiring specialized computers called routers to direct them to their destinations. Every computer on the Internet is assigned at least one Internet protocol (IP) address that identifies it to other computers. Computers that are

continuously connected to the Internet (such as servers) will likely have static IP addresses, whereas those that are only intermittently connected (such as clients) are assigned dynamic IP addresses that change (usually within a specified range of numbers) upon each new connection. Each packet of data transmitted on the Internet will include information about its origin and destination—IP addresses. Routers on the network will inspect each packet of data for this information and, based on a directory of IP addresses, forward it to the nearest address (another router) in order that the packet of data arrives at its destination in the most efficient manner possible. In short, data travelling across the Internet must necessarily pass through routers and, by controlling what routers do, one can influence how the Internet functions.

The cheapest, most straightforward way to filter content is simply to block the IP addresses of computers known to be hosting “offensive” content. When a client requests data, a router must look up the IP address of the server hosting the requested data. If that server’s address has been put on a list of blocked addresses, the client will receive a message indicating a denied request. However, since IP addresses can only be blocked in their entirety, this method can contribute to “over-blocking” because some IP addresses host hundreds of individual websites. In other words, an IP address is the address for an actual computer, and often a web hosting company hosts multiple websites on a single server. Indeed, it is estimated that 70% of the websites for .com, .org and .net domains share an IP address with at least 50 other websites (Clayton, et al. 2006). So, for example, if a single server hosts 20 different websites, they each share a single IP address. If one of these websites were to be deemed offensive and its IP address were to be blocked, the other 19 non-offending websites would also be blocked. However, IP address filtering is relatively cost-effective: routers have to look up the destination IP address of

each packet on the Internet anyway, so there is negligible added computation in identifying (and blocking) a blacklisted address (Roberts, et al. 2009).

Domain Name System (DNS) blocking allows somewhat more discrimination on the part of the filterer. Domain names and Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) are the actual website names and address as they appear in our browsers. For example, the URL and domain name for CUNY are <http://www.cuny.edu> and “cuny.edu,” respectively. DNS servers are computers on the network that have access to a directory of such names, and can translate into IP addresses, making it easier for users to navigate the Internet: one does not have to remember each webpage’s IP address, only its DNS name. If a blacklist of URLs or DNS names were compiled and removed from the DNS directory, users attempting to connect to those sites would have no means to do so: the server simply wouldn’t understand the request. But although DNS blocking must also block whole websites, it allows clients to access other websites associated with the same IP address, reducing but not eliminating the possibility of over-blocking. Thus, if the *New York Times* published one offending article to nytimes.com, and the MIIT decided to remove nytimes.com from the DNS directory, no other articles from the *New York Times*, political or otherwise, could be viewed from China.

Finally, keyword filtering is both more precise and costlier than either IP address or DNS filtering. As the name suggests, it filters any words or phrases contained on a website or in its URL, and can block single “offending” pages, leaving the rest of a website accessible. Moreover, it can filter any text-based internet application, such as email and instant-messaging. On the other hand, non-text content, such as images and video cannot be filtered by keyword. Keyword filtering enables the state to react to time sensitive issues, for example, by blocking words related

to Tiananmen Square in the days surrounding the June 4th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. But according to Roberts, et al.,

A keyword filter must examine the entire stream of content, rather than just the very short destination data, and must perform text searching on that much greater amount of data. That text searching operation is much more expensive than the simple table lookup operation required by IP filtering (Roberts, et al. 2009: 12).

Thus, insofar as the list of taboo subjects is constantly evolving—as are the euphemisms used online to talk about taboo subjects—keyword filtering demands more administrative resources than either a DNS or an IP block: some group of people have to determine the universe of offensive words, not simply the universe of offensive sites or pages (Wines 2009; Roberts, et al. 2009).

China's Great Firewall makes use of each of the filtering techniques above in order to selectively isolate itself from parts of the global Internet. Notably, Chinese end-users do not have access to several of the world's largest and most influential social media applications. For example, Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, the world's 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> largest social media platforms, are simply inaccessible to the average user inside China, and at least 1,500 different words were blocked in 2013 (Ballve 2013; Ng 2013). The result of this filtration system is what some have described as a “sovereign intranet”: a domestic ecosystem that is largely independent of the global Internet (Wertime 2016). Indeed, in 2011, it was estimated that 96% of all Web traffic in China was local, i.e., directed to web sites hosted within China (Roberts 2011).

However, as the author of the study notes,

The extremely high proportion of local web traffic in China may be the result of the success of the Chinese government in blocking the international sites, like Facebook, YouTube, and Blogger, that are generally the biggest destination in other countries. Or it might be because Chinese people like to read content written in Chinese by other Chinese about Chinese topics run by Chinese people (Roberts 2011).

In all likelihood, both factors influence the nature of China's domestic Web traffic. But what is notable in terms of the proposed framework is that such control reflects the publicly held and concentrated nature of China's national-level network infrastructure. That is, control is both direct and centralized: there is a single "list" of sites and words that is managed, however effectively, by the state center itself. Control is to some degree also preemptive, reflecting the fact that access to Internet applications is dependent on access to this infrastructure. If a word or site has been blacklisted, users will find their autonomous use of this infrastructure hampered severely.

The state's ability to directly and centrally control key choke points in its domestic network is a crucial aspect of its strategy to control speech online. But what is also certain is that China's sovereign intranet could not flourish as it has were it not for the fact that Chinese end-users have multiple domestic alternatives to the dominant global social media. Thus, state attempts at controlling speech cannot be limited to blocking foreign media, but must also turn their attention to China's domestic actors, a point to which I turn next.

### *Application Service Providers*

As I have just argued, part of the state's strategy to manage speech over new media is to determine which services—which websites and applications—the average Chinese user will have

access to, effectively filtering access to some of the world's most influential social media applications. But notwithstanding the denial of access to these services, China's domestic Internet is thriving. Sina Weibo, China's most popular microblogging service, had more than 500 million registered users and 54 million daily active users in 2013 (Lam 2013). Indeed, in 2013, three of the world's 10 largest social networks, and six of the largest 20, originated in China (Ballve 2013). Thus, despite being denied access to some of the world's most popular social media, Chinese users have multiple homegrown choices and, thus, efforts to control social media must also be directed at local actors: service providers and individual end-users.

Despite the obstacles that prevent client- and server-side filtering, the state is not without means of exercising control over the peripheries of the network. With regard to server-side control, however, the state's strategy has less to do with controlling servers directly than it does with controlling the private organizations that operate them. Such indirect forms of control are, in fact, functions of the state's monopoly control over the critical Internet infrastructure on which ASPs depend. In order to provide application services to end-users, ASPs must be authorized by the state and, in order to maintain their status, must take on censorship responsibilities themselves. In effect, as outlined in a series of regulations, the state delegates to the private sphere much of the practical work of controlling content on social media.

In 2000, the State Council adopted the "Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services," which stipulated that in order for a commercial Internet information service provider (either an ASP or an Internet access provider) to commence operations, it must obtain a license from the state and, in order to retain its license, must document the activities of its users. For example, according to Article 14 of the Measures,

Providers of internet information services engaged in journalism, publishing and BBS services shall record all information content and the time it was issued, and the internet



address or city name; internet access providers shall record information regarding the amount of time each customer was on the internet, the customer's account number, internet address or city name, primary phone number, etc. Providers of internet information services and internet access providers shall maintain these records for 60 days, and shall make them available to all relevant government agencies examining them pursuant to law (State Council 2000).

Moreover, ASPs are prohibited from producing, assisting in the production of, issuing, or broadcasting any information:

1. opposing the basic principles as they are confirmed in the Constitution;
2. jeopardizing the security of the nation, divulging state secrets, subverting state power, or jeopardizing the integrity of the nation's unity;
3. harming the honor or the interests of the nation;
4. inciting hatred against peoples, racism against peoples, or disrupting the solidarity of peoples ;
5. disrupting national policies on religion, propagating evil cults and feudal superstitions;
6. spreading rumors, disturbing social order or disrupting social stability;
7. spreading obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, terror, or abetting the commission of a crime;
8. insulting or defaming third parties, infringing on the legal rights and interests of third parties; and
9. containing any other content prohibited by law or administrative rules.

(State Council 2000)

These prohibitions are sufficiently vague and broad to afford the state a great amount of leeway in determining which ASPs have violated them—indeed, almost any kind of content has

the potential of being in violation. In contrast, in the years following the Measures' promulgation, the state has issued several other decrees that clarify the "security" precautions that providers are obligated to take. In 2005, for example, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) issued the "Regulations on Internet Security Protection Technology Measures," requiring ASPs to keep records of user activities, "including user registration information, log-in and log-out time, IP address, content and time of posts by users," for at least 60 days (MPS 2005; SEC 2011). And in 2012, the State Council issued the "Internet Information Service Management Rules," updating these and earlier regulations by extending the records-keeping requirement to six months. Moreover, the 2012 regulations seemed "explicitly aimed at microblog platforms and related social media" (Creemers 2012). According to David Wertime,

the message to China's social media is clear: We can shut you down. Providers of social media platforms will surely sweat when reminded by the State Council that their businesses merely exist at the pleasure of those in power. The law's preamble now lists "protecting national safety and public interest" (维护国家安全和公共利益) as one of its objectives, and adds that which "incites illegal gatherings" (煽动非法聚集) to the category of illegal speech. This signals that Beijing is acutely aware of the potentially destabilizing power of China's blogosphere.

In short, because private ASPs are dependent on the state for authorization, they are compelled to take on the role of censors themselves (Henochowicz 2014; [Beach 2013](#)). Social media ASPs employ their own teams of censors to surveil user activity and either delete content or deactivate user accounts in violation of content policies (Wines and Lafraniere 2011). For example, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that more than 16 percent of all posts to Sina Weibo, China's most popular microblogging website, were deleted due to Sina's own content violations, and in 2013, more than 100,000 Sina Weibo users had their accounts

suspended for violating the Weibo “community code of practice” (Osnos 2014; Lam 2013). Performing these censorship functions requires ASPs to employ significant labor resources since. Although ASPs are compelled to implement proprietary filtering programs on their servers, such systems are not fail proof, and they must also employ human monitors. According to Freedom House, the Chinese social networking site RenRen employed “500 people in the medium-sized city of Wuhan alone whose task was to delete politically sensitive content posted by users” (2011).

These costs are, of course, the price of accessing the world’s largest social media market. One reason that ASPs such as Google and Facebook have been unable to achieve success in China—one reason that their services are filtered—is that they have been unwilling to take on the responsibility of delegated censor. In their absence, domestic ASPs have filled the void, and those unwilling to perform this role have failed to survive. For example,

Fanfou, China’s earliest microblogging platform, was closed down for 16 months in 2009-10 after users posted information about riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang. Bill Bishop [argues] that Sina rose to the top of the market both by building a great product and because, “it knew what it needed to do to stay in good graces with the government, unlike Fanfou” (Beach 2013).

And as Sina admitted in its filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, such compliance has included

[disabling] the Comment feature on our platform for three days to clean up feeds related to certain rumors. To the extent that PRC regulatory authorities find any content displayed on our platform objectionable, they may require us to limit or eliminate the dissemination of such information on our platform. Failure to do so may subject us to liabilities and penalties and may even result in the temporary blockage or complete shutdown of our online operations (US SEC 2013: 36).

In sum, access to Chinese vast and growing social media market ensures that domestic ASPs assist the state in the task of filtering and monitoring content, and penalizing content violators on their platforms. Even if they do so grudgingly, many ASPs have decided that the price of access is worth the cost. Thus, by regulating private enterprises, the state effects indirect control over social media content.

### *End-user Control*

As I have argued, the actual authors, distributors, and consumers of content in the social media ecology are a radically diffuse base of individuals, many of whom actually own the technical means to generate and share content autonomously. Each of these factors militate against direct, centralized, and preemptive control, but not, however, control as such. As I have already shown, there are many actors within the social media ecology other than individual end-users upon whom the state can lean its weight. Indeed, it is largely through these actors that the state, indirectly, exercises control over the actions of end-users. But state efforts at control are not only mediated through private sphere organizations. Indeed, the threat of coercion and other forms of influence by the state may also be both direct and decentralized—even devolved to the individual end-user himself.

Like ASPs, end users are also explicitly prohibited from publishing or displaying various types of content online, including content that “impairs the national dignity of China, is reactionary, obscene, superstitious, fraudulent or defamatory, or otherwise violates PRC laws and regulations” (US SEC 2014: 36). Indeed, according to the “Judicial Interpretation on the

Application of Law in Trial of Online Defamation and Other Online Crimes,” promulgated in September, 2013, Internet users who fabricate or knowingly share defamatory false information online may be sentenced to up to three years in prison (US SEC 2014: 37).

The most ambitious policy intended to manage the behavior of end users exploits these regulations as well as those that require access providers and ASPs to document and store information about user activity. This strategy, referred to as “real-name registration” (shímíng dēngjì 实名登记), is a comprehensive policy intended to compel users of Internet services to register for accounts linked to their verified identities. Although users are allowed to adopt pseudonyms when posting online, Internet access providers and social media ASPs are required to record the true identity of the user. In practice, full-scale implementation of the real-name registration policy has been less than successful, but the logic of such a policy is clear: if a complete record of content production and distribution exists, the state could, upon request, access these records, then identify and retroactively punish a user who posted something improper. In theory, knowing that this is a possibility might make one think twice about posting content that may be construed as violating content restrictions.

Perhaps more illustrative of state attempts to manage the behavior of individual end-users is a policy implemented by Beijing in 2013, ostensibly aimed at stopping the spread of what are referred to, vaguely, as “irresponsible rumors,” which may amount to any criticism of officials or accusations of official misconduct (Mooney 2014). Indeed, there is no official definition of what constitutes a rumor, and analysts suggest that “rumor-mongering” is merely a pretense for the state to prosecute its opponents in the media (Lam 2013; RFA 2013). According to this policy, authors of rumors or “false” posts that were visited by 5,000 users or reposted more than 500 times would be subjected to punishment including up to three years in jail. The logic of this

5,000/500 rule is based on a point that I have made above, namely, that not all social media users, nor all social media posts are created equally. That is, from the state's perspective, user-generated content that is politically sensitive, but is not distributed to a wide enough audience may not be considered a threat worth pursuing.

As I have argued above and in chapter one, content production online conforms to what is known as a "long tail" distribution, where relatively few actors publish the majority of content, and the majority of actors publish sparingly. For example, although there were 324 million registered Sina Weibo accounts in 2012, eighty percent of the original content published on the platform was generated by a mere 4.8 percent of users (Fu and Chao 2013). As several new media scholars have pointed out, in traditional media spheres, the strategy of production would be, in various ways, to harness the power of these highly productive users. Under these circumstances, these elite would constitute a relatively concentrated group of actors that could be subjected to various forms of control. However, if the cost of production is minimal, such as it is in the social media ecology, it is difficult to isolate such an elite. That does not mean, however, that such an elite does not exist. Rather, despite the diffusion of social capacity engendered by social media, there remains a social media elite: a group of users who either publish more frequently or, what is more important from the vantage point of the state, who reach a wider audience with each post.

However, this social media elite is not a corporate group. That is, in a single day, with a single post, an otherwise obscure and marginal individual might post content that achieves widespread distribution. The logic of the 5,000/500 rule, therefore, reflects the fact that the borders of this social media elite are porous and does not try to isolate the group in terms of who is most likely to reach a widespread audience, such as, perhaps, that 4.8 percent of Weibo users,

but rather in terms of who actually does reach a widespread audience. Rather than attempting to identify a concentrated elite, and rather than pursuing each and every threat in a diffuse base of authors, the state attempts to augment and to exploit naturally occurring concentrations of social capacity that result from the popularity of specific posts. The 5,000/500 rule, in combination with efforts to register and document individual identities, ensures that the boundaries surrounding the social media elite are drawn according to demonstrated communicative power. It recognizes that such power is fluid—it is not simply determined by the identity of the user, but by the salience of particular ideas as judged by the social media consumer base. In other words, the state has decided what constitutes a political threat, a critical “mass” audience: if one can reach an audience of 5,000 or an audience of 500 who, in turn, are inspired to distribute the author’s post to their own networks, one is, according to this formula, a potential threat.

Real-name registration and the 5,000/500 rule allow for the possibility of radically decentralized, privatized, and autonomous authorship online by devolving the onus for censorship to the end-user. The end-user remains radically autonomous, but is denied anonymity and, moreover, her centrality in the network is determined by her own activity. Control by the state is, therefore, indirect (real name registration must be implemented by private sector ISPs), decentralized (devolved to ISPs and to individual end-users), and potentially retroactive (a user or an ISP may not be punished for posting or hosting content until it becomes a problem).

This last point is significant because it appears that, in many ways, the greatest concern of the state is not the authorship and communication of threatening speech, per se, but rather the mobilization of dissent. Indeed, on China’s social media, posts that are merely critiques of the Party are far less likely to be deleted than those that include actual calls to collective action (King, et al. 2012). Thus, it appears that the Party is willing to allow for the possibility that some,

perhaps many, users will employ social media to disseminate politically sensitive information. What it cannot allow is for that information to cause instability—public demonstrations and widespread calls for political reforms. In other words, it may not be that the state is less concerned with threatening speech, but rather that what constitutes threatening speech in the social media ecology is the propensity for speech to mobilize political action.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, new media have made it possible for historically large numbers of individuals to own and autonomously generate media content that is consumable by a mass audience. The consequence of these developments, however, is at once a gift and a curse to a state with an interest in managing political speech. At the same time that the state considers the Internet and the applications that make use of this infrastructure to be essential to the development of its economy, it recognizes that they may be used in pursuit of interests that threaten political elites. But rather than posing an inherently new set of threats, new media exacerbate a more fundamental problem: the dilemma of state power. Thus, as with traditional media, state attempts to resolve this dilemma conform to three dimensions of control—sovereign, vertical, and temporal—each reflecting the constraints imposed by interactions between technology and social actors, to wit, the information ecology



## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

*“Every age thinks it’s the modern age, but this one really is.”* – Tom Stoppard, 1876

In this dissertation, I have employed a Weberian concept of social power in order to theorize the challenges posed by, and the varieties of state response to, the dilemma of state power: the need of all states to empower societies with social capacities that may, in turn, threaten state interests. Rather than define the state in terms of its ends or its motivating interests, Max Weber defined the state in terms of its relationship to particular sources of social power, namely, the means of physical violence. But although violence is the ultimate source of political power, it is but one resource of social power on which states must rely in order to reproduce themselves. States must inevitably also rely on other, secondary sources of social power, both economic and ideological. Moreover, in order to legitimate their rule, states must actively provision societies with the capacity to employ social power resources that can be—and often are—used in ways that threaten state interests. This is the crux of the dilemma of state power.

I have argued that the dilemma of state power in part reflects the versatility and ambiguity of various resources of social power. That is, there are many tools and technologies that can be repurposed in service of more than one form of power and, moreover, can be used in ways that serve state interests or in ways that threaten them. It is, therefore, difficult for states to justify the wholesale expropriation of such technologies from the private sphere, as they might in the case of technologies whose applications are limited to warfare and are unambiguously threatening to the state (or do not unambiguously serve state interests). Media are just such versatile and ambiguous means of social power: they have varied power applications that, when

employed privately, independently, or by diffuse groups of social actors, may either be boons or threats to state interests.

Through a comparison of traditional and new forms of media in China, I have shown that rather than posing qualitatively new types of challenges to authoritarian states, new media exacerbate the dilemma of state power. They do so because along each dimension of social control—authority, access, and autonomy—new media shift the relationship between social actors and the means of social power away from conditions most conducive to state intervention. The state's most comprehensive interventions into society are direct, centralized, and preemptive, exercised over social capacities that are expropriated, concentrated, and dependent. But along each of these dimensions, new media engender conditions in which critical social capacities—to author, publish, distribute, or consume content—are held privately, diffusely, and may be employed more independently.

Case studies from China support my contention that, even in their efforts to manage political speech, it is unlikely that modern states will attempt to make exhaustive interventions into a media ecology. Instead, state interventions into media ecologies are targeted, circumscribed, and even ad hoc. Moreover, the kinds of interventions states make in order to control political speech reflect interactions between states and social actors constrained by distinct features of the various information ecologies within which media are employed. These interventions vary, not simply between new and traditional forms of media, but also among the traditional media and, indeed, within them. Thus, lessons about how control would be exercised over new media were foreshadowed by how control was exercised over traditional forms of media.

In the remaining pages of this dissertation, I attempt to summarize the foregoing analysis, by articulating the primary conclusions and contributions of my research, as well as their implications for future research.

### **Information Ecologies**

In this dissertation, I have conceived of media as various information ecologies, an adaptation of Yochai Benkler's (2006) concept of information economy. In short, I have argued that media are material technologies, but the effects of these technologies cannot be understood outside of the system of communication—the information ecology—in which they are embedded. That is, the effects of media are not determined by the technologies themselves, but instead reflect the distinct socio-practical and political contexts within which they are employed.

Although Benkler might have been sympathetic to such an approach, his framework focused exclusively on the economic aspects of such a system. Benkler argued that the cost of technology—in particular, the cost of productive capital—impacts who has access to technology. When the capital inputs of media technology are high, control of these technologies tend to be concentrated in the hands large industrial actors; when costs are low, they may be diffused widely throughout society. The relationship between media and access is conceived in purely economic terms: there is an inverse relationship between the cost of productive capital—of media technology—and the number of actors with access to such technology. In these terms, the primary effect of new media innovations has been the reduction in the cost of productive capital, and the consequent diffusion of access to social capacities, such as the capacities to author, publish, and distribute mass media content.

However, Benkler was not the sole source of the ecological perspective to media that I have taken. Indeed, as I showed in chapter one, the "media as practice" approach to media studies suggests that one cannot understand media outside of their socio-practical context (Couldry 2012). That is, media are means that may be—and often are—employed in different ways under different circumstances. Thus, as I have shown, the fact that the Chinese language lacks an alphabet is as much a constraint on the diffusion of authorial and consumptive capacity as is the cost of media technology; permissive attitudes toward the consumption of knock-off goods, such as DVDs, have as much to do with China's blockbuster film market as does its growing middle class; and the practice of investigative journalism in China looks different from that of the United States, not only because of a different political climate, but also because of different philosophical traditions that influence the identities of journalists.

But more than this, a "media as practice" approach suggests that it is not enough to simply identify constraints on the diffusion of technology or of particular capacities. That is, besides how many actors can use media (access), one must also focus on who can use media (authority) and how media can be used (autonomy). To this end, I have advanced the concepts of authority and autonomy to describe, respectively, the rights of social actors to employ media and the independence with which they may employ those media that they have access to. The former, in particular, informs why the perspective taken here, which focuses on state-level constraints in addition socio-practical ones, is a necessary departure from both Benkler and Couldry. In short, to understand media as system of communication, one cannot ignore the independent effects of the single most influential political actor in any social system: the state.

What is often ignored in the literature on new media, a lacuna that I have tried to address explicitly, is the importance of political constraints on how media are employed. As I have

shown throughout this dissertation, access to social capacity and the autonomy with which social capacity may be employed are heavily influenced by actions taken by the state. By investing in infrastructure, by centralizing or decentralizing the management of state-owned properties, by regulating the import of foreign produced media, or by imposing licensing requirements for the exercise of specific media capacities, the state leaves an indelible imprint on the shape of any information ecology. These state interventions may be taken for reasons of administrative expedience, such as the "four-tiered management reform" of China's broadcast television industry, or to consolidate political control, such as its subsequent recentralization. Moreover, in modern societies, it is the state alone that can declare, if not to determine, which social actors have the right to own particular means of social power or to employ particular social capacities. Thus, as I have shown, the state in China has expropriated technologies, such as national-level network exchange routers, particular organizations, such as TV stations, and even particular social capacities, such as the right to publish news content. In any system of communication, therefore, several programs, policies, and practices that are explicitly state effects, implemented for either administrative or political reasons, will affect who use media and how.

In the next section, I summarize the findings of my case studies and elaborate the relationships described above, i.e. how particular social and political contexts (information ecology) shape the qualities of media use (dimensions of social capacity) and, in turn, structure the opportunities for state response (dimensions of state control).

### Case Studies: China's Information Ecologies

In the Chinese feature film ecology, the cost of technology represented a steep barrier to participation in film production, resulting in severely constrained access to authorship and publishing opportunities. Moreover, as the nature of feature film production is an inherently collective endeavor, each of the collective authors of a film is dependent on each other, and a film is only as subversive as its most cautious link. This, it turns out, was crucial in the Chinese context because patterns of Chinese film consumption resulted in a blockbuster market, where a film's only real opportunity to recoup its heavy investment is at the box office—a relatively centralized conduit through which all films, in practice, must pass, and at which the state can intervene. By denying subversive films access to theater-going consumers (though not necessarily to DVD buying consumers), the state can effectively ruin a film's chances at turning a profit. Thus, film investors—a crucial element of the collective film author—tend to have a conservative influence on the content of film production. In the case of politicized film content, the state has several subjects that must receive approval prior to production. In all other cases, a film can move through a process made administratively possible by the fact that so few feature films are made in a single year. In short, even though authority over film production has become increasingly privatized and state control must, therefore, be indirect, the concentrated and dependent nature of film production affords the state an opportunity to exercise centralized and preemptive (or even quickly retroactive) forms of control.

As in the feature film ecology, in the book ecology rather than attempting to appropriate the capacity to privately author or publish, the state's primary means of controlling content has been to control distribution. However, although socio-practical barriers to book authorship were

significant, they were not nearly as prohibitive as the economic barriers to access observed in the film ecology. Thus, rather than exploiting organic concentrations of access, in the book ecology the state has sought to impose artificially concentrated levels of access. Such concentrations were made possible by the fact that in order to achieve wide distribution—to be catalogued in libraries and with book retailers—book authors depend on the assignment of an ISBN, and that the state monopolizes the authority to designate these. By appropriating the authority to assign ISBNs, the state manufactured an administrative barrier to access. Then by leasing such capacity to private sphere actors—licensed book publishers—the state delegates control responsibility to a group of corporate actors who are diffuse relative to film producers, but concentrated relative to what they might have obtained absent state intervention. That China’s book market might be relatively diffuse if left to market dynamics is suggested by the existence of its “second channel” book publishing market. Indeed, as is suggested by the state’s passive acquiescence to this black market for books, the state in China is comfortable with a certain level of unregulated media capacity.

By creating administrative barriers to distribution, and by threatening the profitability of private authorship and publication, the state does not eliminate the possibility of the publication of a subversive book speech, but rather limits its impact. The impact of a single book is, moreover, limited by the socio-practical nature of book consumption, which is isolated and iterative as opposed to collective and momentous (as is theatrical film consumption). Thus, even books that can access normal channels of distribution are unable to achieve the type of instant national distribution that a feature film can. The result is an ecology in which authorship and production are privatized, autonomous, and otherwise somewhat diffuse (as indicated by China’s “second channel” book market), but in which distribution authority is effectively appropriated by

the state, concentrated into state-sponsored publishers, and limited by the autonomous—isolated and iterative—nature of book consumption. Therefore, in most cases, control is indirect, decentralized, and preemptive, exercised by a relatively diffuse group of publishers who have economic incentives to publish at the margins of what is politically permissible. But when such boundaries are transgressed, the socio-practical barriers to immediate widespread distribution afford the state ample opportunity to retroactively implement a stopgap and censor published material.

Chapters five and six demonstrated the fact that within a single regime and with respect to a single technology political imperatives are variable. Contrasts between China's TV drama and TV news ecologies, and comparisons between those of televised and print news, revealed the fact that the Chinese state views the authorship and publication of news content as potentially more threatening or politically subversive than the authorship and publication of dramatic or entertainment content. Thus, it was shown that information ecologies are shaped by more than the costs of technology as Benkler's economic theory of media suggests.

In China's TV ecology, there exists a bifurcated system of control in which entertainment programming is subject to different standards than news programming. In terms of the former, the authors of entertainment programming increasingly enjoy private avenues for the production and distribution of their media products. In terms of the latter, however, authorship, production, and distribution are capacities that the state has appropriated from the private sphere. Thus, on the one hand, control over entertainment programming shares features with the book publishing industry—privatized and relatively decentralized production is nonetheless channeled through state-controlled avenues of distribution. On the other hand, control over televised news programming is, in important ways, similar to that of print news content—authors are obligated



to be licensed by the state and typically work for state-owned distributors of news content, such as TV stations or newspaper publishers. As I have argued, this similarity reflects the political importance attached to news content, which, unlike entertainment TV, is presented as an objective interpretation of world events and has, historically, served as the Party's primary means of communicating its vision of politics to society. Moreover, unlike forms of entertainment such as film and literature, news content is something that is produced and consumed at regular and frequent intervals, thus driving up the administrative cost and hindering the effectiveness of retroactive control over content. Therefore, irrespective of media technology, the state has gone out of its way to appropriate the authority to author and publish news content.

There are however, important contrasts between the TV and newspaper ecologies that reflect differences in the characteristics of the media technologies themselves. For example, the threat of TV news is magnified by the ubiquity of television in Chinese homes, and that of print news is tempered by relatively smaller and often localized consumer bases. The diffusion of consumptive capacity reflects the increasingly affordable cost of television technology, but also the low practical barriers to access that attend to a medium that does not require a sophisticated audience and can be enjoyed simultaneously by an entire family. Moreover, the nature of televised news, like film production, requires coordinated action on behalf of what are inherently collective authors, thus fusing a dependent journalist corps with its sponsoring TV station. In contrast, print news journalists are relatively independent—there are opportunities and even financial incentives for freelance print journalists to take risks and pursue investigative stories that are critical of state actors. The result of the various features of TV and print news ecologies has been that, in the TV news ecology, the state exercises direct, relatively centralized, and preemptive forms of control over content whereas, in the print news ecology, control is both

direct (over staff journalists) and indirect (over freelancers), but decentralized and often retroactive, in the form of censorship, but also as coercion.

Modes of control over traditional media thus anticipate modes of control over new media. That is, despite the novelty of digital media, they still work to arrange social capacity in terms of variation in access, autonomy, and authority. In fact, I have argued that the political novelty of new media is that, in many ways, social capacity has been polarized along each of these dimensions—it has become more diffuse, more independent, and more privatized. However, as in each of the cases above, the media ecology is not limited to a single technology, but includes a system of organizations and actors who are variously constrained by the social and political context. Thus, although the capacity to author and distribute content has been rendered more private, diffuse, and independent by the emergence of smart phones and social media, the infrastructure necessary to connect these devices, and the backbone routers that direct their communications, are state-owned and highly centralized resources. Here the state has appropriated a resource that is organically concentrated—a public utility—and used it to disrupt the flow of communication by filtering data based on web sites or words known or believed to be subversive.

But control over new media operates on more than the level of infrastructure. At the level of application service provider (ASP), appropriation of capacity runs up against the state power dilemma more directly: the state has an interest in having private companies develop new applications and, thus, will not nationalize this sector of the economy. Instead, it places restrictions on the type of content these companies can host and, thereby, delegates control responsibilities to the private sphere. Those private companies willing to take on these responsibilities have access to the world's largest and growing Internet user population.

However, since the actual authors and distributors of content on new media are a radically diffused population of end users, delegating control responsibilities to private sphere ASPs is necessarily an uncomprehensive strategy of management. Individual end users are not motivated by profit and given the autonomy with which any of a diffuse base of users can author and distribute content over new media, there are millions of potential threats that simply cannot be managed directly, centrally, or preemptively. Thus, as it has within traditional media ecologies, the state has attempted to manufacture artificial levels of concentrations of capacity and has appropriated the authority to employ capacity in particular ways. That is, particular kinds of posts are politicized and expressly forbidden—notably, the publication of news content online is restricted to state-sanctioned news outlets. Moreover, the penalties for distributing offensive content are explicitly designed to exploit hierarchies that obtain even though access is radically diffused. That is, the 500/5,000 recognizes that only an elite group of social media users can have their posts shared 500 times or viewed 5,000 times. Thus, although access to technology is increasingly diffuse, access to large audiences is relatively concentrated and exploited to make control manageable by the state.

In sum, as a comparison of China's traditional and new media ecologies reveals, the goal of the state is never unmitigated, total control over media capacity—indeed, as the dilemma of state power suggests, such control is not only elusive, but is also potentially disadvantageous to the state. Instead, the state in China has sought to limit the possibility for rapid or widespread distribution of subversive content. In each case, the state has taken what was given by the features of the medium in practice and has tried to exploit the resulting qualities of social capacity or has tried to render them more amenable to control by the state center—either by manufacturing dependencies or concentrations in social capacity or by appropriating specific

capacities from the private sphere. And although the state has not sought comprehensive control, nor has it sought uniform control over the various media ecologies. Indeed, in China, the following patterns were observed that appear to guide the choices made by the state in its efforts to manage political speech:

1. The most common strategy of control was the exploitation or manufacture of concentrations of capacity. In the film ecology, concentrations of productive capacity were relatively organic, resulting from the capital-intensive nature of film production. In the book ecology, concentrations of productive and distributive capacity were artificial, resulting from the state's appropriation of the authority to issue ISBNs. And in the social media ecology, the state appropriated control over concentrated social capacity, such as national-level Internet backbone routers, while crystallizing concentrations of end-user authorial capacity through the 500/5,000 rule. In each of these cases, limiting the number of actors that the state needed to interact with enabled centralized control, which could be exercised directly, by the state, or indirectly, as the state kept a limited number of private sphere actors at arm's length. Indeed, reflecting China's increasing inclination to adopt market reforms, within each media ecology, the Chinese state has sought to delegate control responsibilities to relatively concentrated groups of private sphere organizations that had economic incentives to comply with state guidelines (e.g., film producers, book publishers, and social media ASPs). Typically, indirect forms of centralized control were facilitated by the additional manufacture of a dependency, such as a licensing or registration requirement, which also facilitated preemptive control over distribution.

2. However, the most circumspect strategy of control was appropriation of the authority to employ media capacity, enabling direct control by the state. This mode of control appears to be reserved for two kinds of situations. In the first place, when capacities were so concentrated (either organically or artificially) that they also allowed centralized control over the distribution of mass mediated content, they tended to be mediated at some point by the state. In the film ecology, the state mediated distribution through the CFB; in the book ecology, distribution was mediated through state control over ISBNs; and in the TV drama ecology, privately produced programs were mediated by state-owned television stations. In the second place, the state has sought to appropriate the capacity to author and publish certain politicized forms of content. For example, the capacity to publish news or editorial content was treated as much more politically threatening than non-news content, such as dramatic film, literature, or televised drama, and was appropriated irrespective of the observed levels of concentration (organic or manufactured). In terms of the first situation, it may be that when combined with centralized control, direct control is simply more manageable, thus representing a low hanging fruit. The second, however, appears to reflect the fact that news and editorial content are perceived to be much greater political threats than non-news content. They are therefore pursued despite the extra resources necessary to register, track the behavior, and retroactively punish a group of relatively decentralized actors, such as journalists or bloggers.
  
3. Finally, in those cases where there were lower barriers to independent authorship of politicized content, the state attempted either to manufacture dependencies that would allow preemptive forms of control, or to register and document individual identities and

activity to enable retroactive forms of control. The former was most evident where capacities were centralized, and facilitated the kinds of indirect but centralized forms of control outlined above. Under such circumstances, private sphere actors could autonomously author or produce content, but were dependent on the state for access to networks of distribution. On the other hand, when capacities were both relatively diffuse and autonomous, such as in the new media ecology, the state has attempted to document the identities and activity of individual users, and has selectively and retroactively intimidated or coerced violators of (often vague) content restrictions.

### **Future Research**

The argument that I have made in this dissertation is one about the relationship between states and the means of social power. By defining the state in Weberian terms, I have made a claim about the state's relationship to the means of physical violence as well as to secondary and versatile means of social power. To wit, the inability of states to monopolize authority over secondary and versatile means of social power, and the need for states to empower citizens with some of those very means pose a dilemma that can take a variety of forms, one that is neither restricted to authoritarian regimes, nor to the realm of media. Perhaps the most fruitful avenue for future research, then, will be comparisons of state responses the dilemma of state power across regime type and across various technologies of social power.

First, cross-country comparisons, such as how different kinds of regimes respond to the dilemma of state power, may reveal deeper insights into the nature of state-society relations.

Liberal states, for example, must also exercise control over social behavior and, therefore, must also expropriate, centralize, or preempt the use of particular social power resources or particular social capacities. In the realm of media, liberal states may find it necessary to manage hate speech, the dissemination of depictions of child abuse, or trade in illicit goods—forms of social action that are increasingly conducted online. These battles may be complicated in ways that are distinct from authoritarian contexts, given constraints such as strong protections for free speech, separate legislative and executive powers, independent judicial institutions, or a federal system of government.

Second, whereas the substantive focus of this dissertation was media, the dilemma of state power may implicate other secondary and versatile means of social power as well. The most obvious example is what John Torpey has called the "means of mobility" (Torpey 2001). The means of mobility are technologies—vehicles, infrastructure, and systems of identification—that enable (or prevent) social actors to travel into, around, or out of the territory of a national state. By facilitating the transport of goods, states promote economic growth; by enabling the transport of people, they may foster social integration and political participation. Yet these same means of mobility that are boons to the state, may as easily be repurposed in service of ends that threaten state or public interests. The means of mobility may be used to traffic narcotics, to mobilize insurgents, or may serve as densely populated targets for acts of terrorism. The ambiguous nature of the means of mobility, therefore, poses to the state questions about where, when, how and over whom control should be exercised: by the state itself or by private sphere actors; by the state center or subnational agents of the state; and prior to the exercise of social capacity or retroactively? Answers to these questions may reveal as much about the nature of state power as they do about systems of transit.

In sum, the theoretical framework employed in this dissertation will be most useful to students of media and to students of the state, but may also be useful to students of social power broadly. I have offered an innovative conception of media—the information ecology—and have adapted a Weberian concept of social power to problematize the relationship between states and societies. State responses to the dilemma of state power may vary widely according to the nature of an information ecology, however, there is not an infinite range of responses. Instead, there is limited variation in the quality or type of state response to a dilemma that can manifest itself in myriad ways. When states are confronted with the dilemma of state power, they have a circumscribed set of qualities or types of control, each of which reflect the nature and organization of social capacity in society.

### **States and Social Power**

It is altogether too common to cast the media transformation currently underway in terms heralding an entirely new stage in human affairs. Phrases such as “the Internet revolution,” “the information revolution,” “the information age,” and “the digital era” abound in studies of media and suggest a fundamental shift in the nature of social relations. To be fair, new media have certainly engendered a shift in the organization of critical social power resources and social capacities: the means of communication have been diffused to unprecedented numbers of individuals who now have the private and autonomous capacity to author, publish, distribute, and consume mass media. However, in terms of the theory of social power proposed here, there has not been a momentous, qualitative change. Rather, new media have engendered shifts along three



dimensions—authority, access, and autonomy—each of which describes a quality of a relationship between social actors and means of social power.

Whether further adoption of new media will result in revolutionary outcomes, overturning long-standing structures of power, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What I have shown, however, is that the subversive potential of new media is a function of simultaneous shifts along each dimension of social capacity: from publicly to privately held social capacity (authority), from concentrated to diffusely held social capacity (access), and from dependent to autonomous social capacity (autonomy). Moreover, as comparisons from the Chinese film, book, television, and newspaper ecologies have revealed, rather than bringing about entirely new modes of political control over media, the emergence of new media alongside traditional forms has entailed adaptations of already existing repertoires, repurposed and redeployed in the social media sphere.

In both traditional and new media ecologies, the Chinese state has sought either to exploit organically occurring or artificially manufactured concentrations of social capacity. In the film ecology, concentrations of productive capacity were relatively organic, resulting from the capital-intensive nature of film production. In the book ecology, concentrations of productive and distributive capacity were artificial, resulting from the state's expropriation of the authority to issue ISBNs. And in the social media ecology, the state expropriates control over concentrated social capacity, such as national-level Internet backbone routers, while crystallizing concentrations of end-user authorial capacity through the 500/5,000 rule. In each media ecology, the Chinese state has sought to delegate control responsibilities to private sphere actors who either have economic incentives to comply (e.g., film producers, book publishers, and social media ASPs) or political ones (e.g., newsroom editors). In each media ecology, the state has

politicized content, either formally, as when it expropriates the capacity to author and publish news content, or informally, as when it characterizes oppositional speech online as "rumor-mongering." And in those cases where there are lower barriers to authoring politicized content, such as print and online news and opinion, the state has, on the one hand, attempted to implement systems of licensing and registration (e.g., journalist press cards or "real-name" registration online) and, on the other hand, selectively intimidated or coerced violators of (often vague) content restrictions.

Comparisons between traditional and new forms of media reveal that states cannot exercise control over each node in a complex system of communication, but nor do they need to. Indeed, the dilemma of state power suggests that states are unlikely to attempt such exhaustive modes of control; it suggests that other state interests compel them not to. Instead, states need only to exercise control in the right place, over the right actors, at the right time. Where the right place is, who the right actors are, and when the right time is will vary by medium and by local economic, political, or social context. However, the logic governing the exercise of control is the same. Insofar as media facilitate the operation of a system of communication—that is, insofar as media may be conceived in ecological terms—controlling the output of that system does not require controlling the entire system. Instead, it may be necessary to expropriate or to delegate the authority to employ some critical capacity; to centrally or preemptively control key nodes (or veto points) in the system engendered either by concentrations of social capacity or dependencies in the exercise of social capacity; or to document the identities and actions of individuals with the private capacity to employ means of social power autonomously. Thus, whether new media pose irresolvable dilemmas of state power—and are, therefore, truly revolutionary—is a function of the state's ability to continue to manage these dimensions of social capacity. States must either

continue to manage existing nodes and relationships in an information ecology or fabricate new ones. And although states may innovate control strategies, they are unlikely to create them out of whole cloth. Rather, state interventions to control media will continue to reflect variation along the three dimensions of social capacity.

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