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The Discourses of the internet in China: Beyond Politicization

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ABSTRACT

THE DISCOURSES OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA: BEYOND POLITICIZATION

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This thesis addresses the politicization trend in the western scholarship of the Internet in China, and problematizes its dominant discourse, the Internet Freedom/Democracy discourse. To this end, it argues that the Internet Freedom discourse, which contributes to the Great Firewall myth, is inaccurate and inadequate to explain the complexity of the Internet in China. Furthermore, it argues that this discourse has not only been historically driven by economic and political interests of the West, but it also has served as a rhetoric to justify the continuation of the U.S. hegemony over the Internet in face of China's economic rise. To support the argument, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is deployed to do the following: first, to examine major texts that are associated with the dominant discourse; second, to historicize the three major components of the discourse, which are the free flow of information, free expression, human rights; third, to examine the relationship between the dominant discourse and the post-colonial development discourse. The thesis argues that while the development discourse of the post-WW II focused on economic growth, Internet freedom discourse resorts to the values and ideology in

a new context where the U.S. economy is perceived to be in decline. Both the dominant discourse and the development discourse are associated with western ideologies that legitimize intervention and domination over the rest of the world. Finally, the geo-politics of the Internet will be discussed to complete the analysis of power and hegemony.

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THE DISCOURSES OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA: BEYOND POLITICIZATION

BY

JIN CHEN
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 20 years since the Internet arrived in China. The rapid development of the Internet brought tremendous changes to various sectors in Chinese society. According to China Internet Network Information Center (2018), as of August 20, 2018, the number of Chinese netizens totaled 802 million, and the Internet penetration rate reached 57.7%. The Internet in China is deeply integrated with people's lives as well as local industries such as transportation, healthcare, finance and environmental protection, among others. All of these developments have taken place with the support of the Chinese government, the investment from private companies, and the participation of Chinese citizens. Online shoppers and consumers account for 71% of internet users in China. 74.1% of Chinese netizens use short video apps to satisfy their entertainment needs. In addition, 58.5% of netizens (470 million) use online government services via Ali Pay or WeChat City Services (CNNIC, 2018).

The remarkable development of the Internet in China has recently attracted attention from researchers and observers both at home and abroad. However, research on the internet in China has existed since its inception. In the early 2000s, China already emerged as a major place for

Internet research (Qiu & Bu, 2013). Kluver and Yang (2005) observed a growing interest in the development and consequences of the Internet in China with the rise of “Internet Studies.” Scholars from political science, communication, international relations, business, and other disciplines published a great amount of research on the Internet in China and issues related to various aspects of the subject (Qiu & Chan, 2004). Additionally, as Herold and De Seta (2015) stated, the amount of research on the Internet in China has undergone a steady growth in publication size and scope over the last two decades, notwithstanding the temporary “slow-down in publications after 2000,” corresponding to the dot.com bust in the summer of 2000 (Kluver & Yang, 2005). In addition, by using the term Internet in China, one should note that there is no one Internet but multiple internets in the world. Since the Internet becomes a “complex, multi-cultural, global, information, communication, commercial and cultural platform”, it is “gradually being adapted to the political, economic and cultural realities and interests of specific countries around the world” (Eko, 2001, p. 445).

With the growing amount of literature on the Internet in China, we may wonder what has been studied so far and what arguments have been made in addressing the topic. Four major academic reviews of previous studies suggest the Internet in China has been constantly politicized in western scholarship. With this in mind, we may further question why such politicization originated in the first place since the existing U.S. Internet Studies scholarship covers a wide spectrum of topics other than political ones. In this case, is the politicization an

honest reflection of China's Internet reality, one that is always bound up with censorship or political constraints? However, the existence of the alternative perspectives and descriptions adopted in some scholarship indicates that the Internet in China is far beyond politics. Then, how could we make sense of this politicization, what are the reasons behind this tendency, and what could be the outcomes?

To answer these questions raised above, the author argues that the dominant Internet freedom/liberal democracy discourse adopted repeatedly by western scholars to explain the Internet in China is inaccurate and inadequate to explain its complex reality, and it contributes to the "Great Firewall" myth. I argue that the discourse has not only historically been driven by the economic and political motives of the West, but also served as a rhetoric to justify the continuation of the U.S. hegemony over the Internet in face of China's economic rise. As the internet was born in the West during the Cold War, it inevitably was imprinted with Western values and the Cold War rhetoric of ideological confrontation. I argue the current dominant discourse of the Internet in China is an extension of a perceived larger ideological conflict between the West and China as well as the global power struggle that accompanies such ideological conflict. In addition, the Internet freedom discourse bears a resemblance to the post-colonial development discourse as both are associated with a powerful western ideology to legitimize U.S.'s intervention and domination over the rest of the world. While the development discourse focused on economic growth, the internet freedom discourse, which includes the free

flow of information, freedom of expression, and human rights, resorts to the values and ideology in the new context where the U.S. economy is in decline and China is on the rise, serving as a rhetoric to justify the continuation of the U.S. hegemony.

In order to support the argument, this thesis will review English-language writings (including major works mentioned in the four reviews and others collected through library research) on the Internet in China to gain a holistic perspective of the subject under investigation. In addition, alternative viewpoints and interpretations discovered in the analysis revealed that the Internet in China is far more complex and multifaceted than the politicized image implied in most western scholarship. Following that, the author will conduct a critical discourse analysis on a subset of the writings to unpack the dominant discourse: first, critically analyzing the texts of major articles that present the dominant discourse to demystify the “Great Firewall” myth; second, historicizing the dominant discourse—from the early free flow of information, to freedom of expression, and to human rights discourse—to show the dominant discourse was by no means the pursuit of great humanistic values but rather was always charged with political and economic motives in favor of the United States and the West; third, linking the dominant discourse to the post-colonial development discourse. After that, the geopolitics of the Internet will be discussed to contextualize the dominant discourse in today’s world.

Above all, each of the following sections in the thesis will be dedicated to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Is there a dominant discourse in writings about Internet in China?

Research Question 2: What are the alternative discourses regarding Internet in China?

Research Question 3: What are the main components of the dominant discourse?

Research Question 4: What explains the proliferation and the dominance of the

dominant discourse of the Internet in China?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, we first review previous academic reviews of China Internet studies and identify the tendency to politicize the Internet in China. Following that, we will look at criticisms offered by scholars towards this politicization trend. The politicization prevents a holistic understanding of the far more complicated Internet in China, ignores both the active role of Internet users and the specific context in China, and implies a criterion set by the West. The established pattern of China Internet studies in English-language scholarship suggests a dominant discourse that treats the Internet as a “democratic tool,” which is supposed to undermine the Chinese government and “free” the Chinese people. As the dominant discourse is the subject of study in this thesis, a detailed analysis is provided in the following chapters. Additionally, alternative discourses are offered here to give a comprehensive view of the internet in China and show different perspectives on internet in China.

Review of Reviews

This section examines what have been studied so far regarding the Internet in China. It also identifies the discourses prevalent in previous studies. As a place to start, four¹ major reviews of studies on the Internet in China will be examined (Qiu & Chan, 2004; Kluver & Yang, 2005; Qiu & Bu, 2013; Herold & De Seta, 2015). Despite the fact that the first and the last study were separated by 10 years, they make similar arguments about the Internet in China, as if time stands still or nothing changes about the Internet in China. By examining the results of these reviews, one could easily establish a dramatic distinction in the works by scholars in China and the ones outside of China. Scholars from the U.S. and others writing in English in the West have prioritized political issues such as censorship and social control at the expense of other issues. Also, it is worth noting that all four articles reviewed academic publications on Internet in China, and came to a similar conclusion about the western scholarship by using multi-methods (both qualitative, quantitative, and longitudinal). Such a triangulation produced a consistent pattern of findings.

Early in 2000s, Qiu and Chan (2004) used a meta-analytical framework and reviewed academic publications on Internet in China. The authors found most researchers outside of China took great interest in queries on political authorities and they concluded the issues that had been

¹ Five reviews regarding Internet in China were found through the NIU library database search. One of them, *Nailing Jell-O to the Wall and Herding Cats- A Content Analysis of Chinese and U.S. Newspaper Coverage of the Internet in China*, was excluded because it focused on newspapers coverage only. It's worth noting that the article also concluded human rights and government control were major themes in the U.S. coverage.

studied include, “How do the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party attempt to control the Internet? What are the implications of political control for the nation’s Internet development? To what extent do official measures restrict activities of major players in the IT industry, individuals and users react to these constraints? What are the political impacts of the Internet?” (p. 280). In contrast, researchers based in China mainly engaged in descriptive research or dialectical discussions and the most prominent issue under investigation is “how the Internet influences traditional mass media and our conception of media studies?” (p. 290). The researchers also concluded micro-level subject matters were less examined despite the fact that studies focusing on individuals and interpersonal relations are strongholds in Western Internet studies (p. 296). A question that was not raised but relevant to current project is why China Internet studies differs greatly from Western Internet studies. In this regard, some scholars argue China internet studies are not real Internet studies but rather “a subset of research into Chinese politics” (Herold & De Seta, 2015, p.79).

In 2005, Kluver and Yang conducted a content analysis of academic articles in English regarding the Internet in China. And they found that, “much of the research generated so far has been exploratory in nature, and has naturally rested on preexisting questions, such as China’s political transformation” (p. 307). Kluver and Yang believed research interest in the Internet in China was motivated by concerns about the political implications of the Internet in China. They pointed out since the late 1990s China has been viewed as an ideal place to test the perception

and expectation that Internet works as a democratizing force. Thus, the authors noted that “the tussle between the Chinese government and the legions of Internet users over content and censorship has occupied academic, political, and other observers” (p. 301). Additionally, the authors stated, “the greatest amount of attention in academic research has been paid to two areas—government control of the Internet and the development of China’s Internet infrastructure” (p. 306). And they further argued, “there seems to be a correlation between journalistic and commercial interests and academic interests” because the same themes repeatedly showed up in both journalistic coverage and academic literature (p. 306). Although the reason why academic analysis paralleled conventional wisdom was not further explored in the study, the authors stressed “the focus on cultural and social life inherent in Internet Studies” was in stark contrast to the “overly focused attention on the politics of the Internet in China” (p. 306). The observation confirmed that the studies on the Internet in China was in essence not Internet studies compared to the larger body of Internet research.

In 2013, Qiu and Bu conducted a content analysis of 1705 academic publications from 1989 to 2012 in China ICT studies. The authors concluded that, the “obsession with Internet and politics has continued” (p. 147). In terms of the question why overseas researchers care so much about the political consequences than their Chinese counterparts, although the authors did not provide further analysis, they stated, “the opposite tendencies probably result from the same root reason of the intellectual power game surrounding the Chinese party-state, the cash-rich

government perceived as oppressive and challenging western dominance worldwide, both online and offline” (p. 174). The statement suggested power struggles between China and the West in the realm of the Internet.

Recently, Herold and De Seta (2015) collected detailed information from books and articles on Chinese Internet published between 1990 to early 2013. After conducting a meta-review together with a discursive analysis, the authors concluded that English-language research discussing the Internet in China still remains rather descriptive and exploratory, and the main paradigm of research is “China’s political transformation.” Authors who wrote about the Chinese internet are predominately located in the United States, constituting the largest group more than those in Chinese-language countries and regions. But they also acknowledged that the U.S.’s supremacy in the knowledge production regarding Chinese Internet partly resulted from linguistic barriers in the academic world. In addition, the authors found the references used in these publications only include a limited number of non-English sources: “This is especially worrying considering that it also excludes almost all of the research done on the Chinese Internet in China itself” (p. 72). As for the research topics, the author found the dominant topics are political and social issues, accounting for, respectively, 37% and 35% of the publications. Specifically, among the top 4 publishing regions, the U.S. and UK researchers focused more on political issues, while Chinese mainland and Hong Kong mainly discussed social issues. The keywords “democracy” and “democratization” recurred in the majority of the publications from

authors in UK and U.S. institutions, which implies inquiries about “the potential democratization of China through the use of technology” (p. 73).

Problematizing the Politicization Trend

As mentioned before, little has changed in the distinct research patterns adopted by the western and Chinese scholars. The notable differences continued to exist in the two bodies of literature as the Western scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on the politics of the Internet in China (Qiu & Bu, 2013). Furthermore, since English is the language that dominates the research on Internet in China, and the majority of the research tends to focus on the political dimensions of the Internet in China, thus the production of knowledge in this area is subject to politicization (Herold & De Seta, 2015).

This ongoing fixation on the “political” perspective and the “democratization” framework in English-language publications seemed problematic to some scholars. Despite its significant achievements, the Internet in China has constantly existed under the shadow of strong criticism from the Western world on the issues of Internet censorship and Internet control. As Fell observed, despite the multi-faceted character of the Internet in China, researchers and observers “have engaged in ever-repeating, entrenched, and constricted narratives on human rights abuses, censorship, and political oppression” (Fell, 2017). According to Meng (2010), the liberal democratization framework could lead to “oversimplified interpretation” of diverse activities in Chinese cyberspace considering its limited view and its disregard for the specificity of the

Chinese context: “It is hugely problematic if the pre-formed lens of democratization becomes so dominant in China Internet studies that it excludes alternate ways of framing new research” (p. 501).

In addition, by faithfully adopting the democratization framework, Western scholars have tended to offer an all-encompassing political interpretation for all activities in the Chinese cyberspace, thus presenting “a picture that has been too black-and-white in nature,” and distorting the reality to some degree (Zhou, 2006, p. 144). As a result, the scholarship on the internet in China has become a subset of research into Chinese politics rather than a nationally defined form of Internet Studies (Herold, & De Seta, 2015).

Zhou (2006) stated, “the real situation is not so clear-cut, and the ability of the government to control the internet is being challenged all the time” (p.144). He also argues the effects of new information technologies in China have been largely shaped by social, political and historical contexts. In fact, despite the multilayered Chinese context of the Internet, many still “take for granted that the Internet plays a clear-cut political role in the China, unconscious of the value-laden implications of this sweeping assumption” (p. 232). In addition, Zhou emphasizes the active role of audiences on the receiving end and argues people who believe the availability of information can cause changes in China are overconfident about the power possessed by information. In Zhou’s opinion, catchwords such as “democracy” and “free market” may have been something very different one hundred years ago. As Zhou (2006) argued, “The criteria used

to define ‘free information’ (most of them of western origin) are also ideologically specific and change as time passes” and different criteria have been adopted by the West to make the other races and civilizations inferior by “judging them by their mastery or otherwise of Western science and technology” (p. 238).

Tsui (2005) noted, although Internet in China attracted attention of the academia, such attention has primarily focused on the Internet’s implications on China’s democratization. This technological deterministic view sees “China as being woken up and ‘democratized’ by the internet” (p. 182). However, Tsui also pointed out this approach has obvious limitations. First of all, “apart from developments in censorship, regulation, and control, other issues are left unexamined”. Second, the assumption that “Chinese population is prepressed and awaits liberation” is weak considering the nationalist sentiment expressed online in China (p. 183). For example, Chinese hackers, unlike its American counterparts, regard themselves as “guardians of the countries” whose targets are “malignant forces of the USA, Japan, and Taiwan” rather than the originally conceived Communist Party (p. 183). Thus, Tsui believed an alternative approach, which focuses on the sociopolitical and cultural contexts, is needed to make sense of the Internet in China.

The tendency to politicize the Internet in China, which rarely deals with the subject holistically, could be regarded as a discourse that dominated the Western scholarship on the Internet in China—the established patterns that play the central role in the production of

knowledge as well as contribute to the creation of stereotypes over Internet in China and the exclusion and marginalization of other possible interpretations. It appears that this type of discussion draws from a series of ideas that we could label the Internet freedom/liberal democratic discourse. It is this discourse that initially appears to be the dominant discourse. Such discourse is grounded in Western political discourse and a belief in the democratic theory, and is aided by the Western political news with its politicized image of China and the use of the Internet in China. Although the government policy, internet scholarship and media reports jointly contributed to the politicized image of the internet in China, it should be made clear that the role of western scholarship remains the focus of this thesis.

Although scholars began to realize the inadequacies and inaccuracies of adopting the same research pattern and participating in such discursive practices, a question that remained unanswered is why such tendencies existed in the first place and why it has sustained itself to this day. Before critically analyzing how and why the established patterns are constructed in Western scholarship, the following part of the chapter intends to briefly introduce the dominant pattern and provide alternatives at the same time. The alternative discourses are only presented here to support the argument that the Internet in China is multifaceted and far more complicated than politics, and thus the politicization of it is not a reflection of the reality, but a falsehood and myth created within certain context. Also, it largely intends to present what aspects have been

excluded or ignored in the face of the dominant discourse rather than conducting an exhaustive investigation.

The Dominant Discourse

The dominant discourse is built upon the assumption that “society adapts to technology in a homogenous manner” and “will have the same outcome regardless of cultural, political or social factors or influences.” This approach tends to “narrow the focus to an assessment of technology’s impact on power”, resulting in discussions about whether the Internet enhanced or undermined state power (Carr, 2016, p. 23-28). Such a perspective is pervasive in China internet studies, and researchers extensively focused on the potential of the Internet as agent of “revolutionary change” both politically and commercially: while the development of internet infrastructure facilitated China’s e-commerce, the Internet was viewed as the potential force to “the reformation, transformation, or even overthrow of China’s Leninist governing party” (Zhao, 2008). In this regard, Kluver and Yang (2005) argued, although scholars may not fully agree with views of radical change, the discourse demonstrates “academic analysis somewhat parallels conventional wisdom” (p. 305).

On the other hand, the “Internet as a democratizing tool” argument has been called into question. To examine the linkage between Internet and democracy, Shie (2006) pointed out the theory of democratic convergence (the greater the level of freedom of communication and information is, the more democratic the society is) together with the construct of technological

determinism contribute to the view that modernization inevitably involves embracing the information age, freer flow of information, and democracy. Under this view, a non-democratic government must choose between maintaining power and developing economy through the adoption of information technology. But in the case of China, the transformative power of internet is “not nearly as extensive nor does it resemble what Western democracy proponents might hope for” (p. 229). Although China’s transformation is not up to Western standards, Shie argued, if the terms *freedom* and *democracy* are characterized by “greater economic prosperity, educational opportunities, access to information, freedom of expression, governmental transparency, opportunity for citizens to make their political views known to officials, and ability for officials to survey public opinion,” then the Internet is playing a role in China’s political transformation (p. 229).

Zhao (2008) also suggested the argument that opening China’s communication markets would undermine the authoritarian control and facilitate democracy in China became less self-evident when Western corporations aligned themselves with Chinese government to implement online censorship. The reaction to the corporate complicity, captured by the question “who lost China’s internet?” not only viewed “the issue of the internet in China simply from a perspective that combines ideological conviction with technological determinism,” but also revealed “a not-so-subtle 21st century version of neo-colonialism” (p. 144). In addition, Zhao noted that the liberal democracy discourse (internet freedom) served and will continue to act as “a rhetorical

device” to demand China further open its media market, but its “usefulness as an analytical framework is dubious.”

According to Herold and De Seta (2015), this discourse “connects democratization, political participation, and freedom of speech”, and “focuses on online dissent and activism” (p. 75). Censorship, control, surveillance, and human rights abuses are keywords that prevailed in discussion on the Internet in China. The government-netizen relationship in China was depicted as the “cat and mouse game” (Endeshaw, 2004) and “dancing with shackles” (Huang 1999), only highlighting the control aspect of the Internet in China. However, Herold and De Seta (2015) argued these metaphors not only “overplay the pervasiveness of surveillance” but also “overstate the political involvement” of Chinese Internet users (p. 75).

Alternative Discourses of Internet in China

In this part, the thesis explores alternative discourses on Internet in China. In the literature on the Internet in China, some of which are written in English by Chinese scholars, one can find, with much less frequency, discourse that is not based on the assumptions and preoccupations of the dominant discourse.

Development discourse

This discourse reveals the instrumental view of technology adopted by Chinese government from the inception of the Internet in China. At the very early stage, the Chinese government

considered internet development as a major driving force for the nation's modernization and thus established Central Leading Groups, headed by the Premier of the State Council, to lead the internet infrastructure building and facilitate the information industry. In 1990s, as China initiated its expansion of telecommunication projects under the global context of the ever-growing IT industry, the Ministry of Information Industry replaced the previous Central Leading Groups and became the core regulatory agency for internet infrastructure construction. The 21st century witnessed China's greater integration into the world economic and political system after entering into WTO in 2001. Although the Internet poses challenges to the political regime, Chinese government continues to facilitate economic development, social stability, and national identity to mitigate such challenges and ensure its own survival (Jiang, 2010). For this purpose, the ruling party allows citizens to use the Internet, channeling their criticism about government policies. Some scholars believe that China's Internet initiative of "informing the public and heading public opinion" reflected the state's tolerance over Internet use. Under this discourse, the Internet is often a tool for economic development, social stability, and legitimization of the ruling system.

According to Ma, Chung & Thorson (2005), the State Council of China has been conducting government online projects since 1999 in a bid to promote the adoption of Internet-based technology at all levels of government. In the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), China stressed the crucial role of e-government in economic growth. The authors viewed Chinese e-government

initiatives as vehicles to support economic growth through an increasingly transparent and decentralized administration and at the same time enable the central government to steer economic activity. The study suggested China's leaders embraced the Internet in national governance to facilitate "administrative reforms by transforming government functions, streamlining procedures, and enhancing transparency" to support its economic development agenda (p.33).

Wang, Chen, Guo, Yu and Zhou (2016) stated China's Internet Plus plan intends to "integrate mobile Internet, cloud computing, big data, and the Internet of Things (IoT) with traditional industries to promote economic restructuring, improve people's livelihoods, and even transform government functions" (p. 5). The authors discussed both the potential and challenges of this national plan, and concluded that Internet Plus will see significant development in the near future and greatly reform China's innovation and economic structure.

Nationalist and culturalist discourse

This discourse responds to the cultural and social concerns over China's integration into global trade and media systems. According to Zhao (2008), throughout the mainstream media and academic literature, there was a strong national sentiment around China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002. The popular "wolves are coming" rhetoric portrayed the transnational corporations as strong wolves while the Chinese industry is the weaker lamb. The perspective pragmatically approached questions like "how to connect the Chinese media and

culture industry with the global tracks; how to effectively absorb foreign capital and expertise; how to strengthen the domestic industries' global market position." In addition, the culturalist perspective relates to the survival and preservation of Chinese culture facing the "westernization" and "disintegration" threat posed by western media influences and "western cultural invasion" (p. 139). Zhao (2008) further argued that with the assumption of an essentialist notion of Chinese culture, this discourse revealed the nation-state-centered frame of analysis, which viewed "domestic media and cultural industry as the carrier of China's economic and cultural power" (p. 140).

Lagerkvist (2008) suggested this discourse is often used by political leaders and intellectuals in China, who claim that the country is experiencing the "dangers of the Internet". The "nationalistic attitude toward foreign culture" is identified as the "overriding theme in most Chinese articles analyzing responses to perceived dangers on the Internet" (p. 133). Lagerkvist also believed this approach reflected the perceptions of cultural imperialism among Chinese intellectuals: many Chinese writers still believe the internationalization of communication will lead to a dependency in which "traditional cultures will ultimately be destroyed through the intrusion of a predominately American 'electronic invasion' of Western values" (p. 132). And the Internet is depicted in those writing as "a threat to Chinese culture and youth, which need to be protected by the power sources available to China" (p. 138).

Netizen participation discourse

This discourse departs from the confrontational depiction of Chinese government and netizens. Xu (2012) suggested political topics are only one aspect of China's online discourse and most online discourse combines mixed genres of the political, the cultural, and the pop cultural. In the face of the popularity of online discourse, the Chinese Communist Party began to pay attention to the comments, suggestions, and complaints made by their netizens. This depiction suggested a dynamic interaction and two-way communication between the government and netizens to jointly bring favorable changes to individuals, society, and the ruling elites, which is different from the cat-and-mouse-game rhetoric: "In contrast to the hierarchical structure of public life, our online lives are egalitarian and mediated, providing an even dialogue between authority and the populace" (p. 21). Additionally, Fu (2017) pointed out the adoption of the political lens when studying online activities in China has limitations since internet content studies already showed that the social and commercial uses were much more important than political ones for Chinese netizens.

User-addiction discourse

This discourse marks a striking feature of China-based internet research that views internet use as a social problem, a pathology, one that needs to be studied by psychologists and behavioral

scientists. These studies focused on finding negative impacts of Internet addiction on academic performance and lifestyle habits (Herold & De Seta, 2015). Fallows (2008) reported that most Chinese approve of government control of the internet, and 93% of internet users regarded internet content as unsuitable for children and expressed concerns over the issue. The construction of the youth as internet-addicts and pornography as online narcotics under the user-addiction discourse is a different approach in studies of Internet in China.

Ni, Yan, Chen and Liu (2009) surveyed 3557 first-year university students from a university in northwest China and found 6.44% of the participants showed Internet addiction. The authors argue special attention should be paid to students who show such symptoms at the very beginning of college life to “ensure the fulfillment of their academic study”, and further studies could contribute to effective prevention and earlier treatment strategies (p. 329). Cao & Su (2007) investigated the prevalence of Internet addiction among Chinese adolescents and explored the related psychological features. The study suggests Internet addiction is not rare in Chinese adolescents, and males are more likely than females to be addicts. Jiang (2014) states “About 18.6 million adolescent internet users in urban China show their tendency toward internet. China is now struggling with this new plight” (p.2). The study also shows internet addiction is significantly linked to poor academic performance.

In this chapter, we have reviewed China Internet studies in the past and identified the problematic politicization tendency. So far, many have adopted meta-analysis and content

analysis to track the development of China Internet studies, and compared the academic work between scholars from China and outside of China. As noted above, some of them questioned the problematic trend of China internet studies, but a few examined the reason why this trend existed and sustained. In this regard, this thesis intends to qualitatively examine the dominant discourse and unpack the reasons of its dominance. To this end, critical discourse analysis will be adopted in this thesis for the inquiry.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY¹

In this section, the author first introduces the method adopted in this thesis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and how the method provides the guidance for the analysis. From Foucault's perspective (1981), discourse is not simply the language that translates struggle and domination, but constitutive of power itself. Discourse is not only "representations of how things are and have been" but also "imaginaries— representations of how things might or could or should be" (Fairclough, 2001, p.233). By setting up the criteria, the dominant discourse marginalized and muted other voices and perspectives. Thus, those who are in the opposite or different position are depicted as enemies or evil that should be attacked because of their failure to satisfy such criteria.

In this regard, a discourse should not be understood as honest reflection of the reality, but rather a social invention that normalizes a selected view among others. Thus, the should-be or the ideal depicted in the discourses was socially constructed and closely tied to power. Applied

¹ Readers who are not familiar with CDA should note, "CDA does not constitute a well-defined empirical methodology but rather a bulk of approaches with theoretical similarities and research questions" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 27).

to the subject under investigation, the discourses of the Internet in China, especially the dominate discourse that was used to interpret the internet-related issues in China, should not be regarded as reality but rather be viewed critically, especially when alternatives exist. Furthermore, discourses are “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world which can be generally identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors” (Fairclough, 2009, p. 164). As discourses are constructed by different groups from different stances, it is crucial to identify the particular social perspective linked to a discourse and thus distinguish the reality from the discourse.

CDA is featured by “the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and reproducible investigations of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual).” Moreover, it constitutes multiple approaches that are “problem-oriented,” and thus it is “interdisciplinary and eclectic” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 27). And the approaches in CDA mainly work with existing data: “texts are not specifically produced for the respective research projects” (p. 32). In addition, the data collection in CDA is not considered as a step that must be completed before the analysis: “it is a matter of finding indicators for particular concepts, expanding concepts into categories....and collecting further data” (p. 27). As the analysis in the thesis is problem-oriented, CDA is used to provide the analytical guidance. In particular, the analysis is driven by the discursive-historical approach, which emphasizes both the text and the context, which refers to not only the “immediate, language or con-text and co-discourse” but also

“the broader sociopolitical and historical context, which discursive practices are embedded in and related to” (p. 93).

CDA intends to “systematically explore the opaque relationship of causality and determination between discursive practices and texts, and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes” and to “investigate how such practices and texts are ideologically shaped by power and struggle over power.” In terms of opacity, it is suggested that the linkage between discourse, ideology, and power may not be clear to those who are involved in the discursive practices, and the “social practice is bound up with causes and effects which may not be at all apparent” (Fairclough, 1993, p.135). In this sense, the method justifies the macro-level approach to the relations of power and discourses without going deep to the psychology of each individual involved in the process, since those individuals are unconsciously affected by the social context and power dynamics. Thus, being critical about a certain discourse is by no means making accusation of individuals, who adopted and contributed to that discourse, for being a conscious accomplice to the existing power. In terms of this thesis, we should not assume the western scholars who adopted the dominate discourse in academic writings about the Internet in China intentionally misled the readers for political reasons, but rather their adoption of the discourse and participation in the discursive practices contributed to the status quo and hegemony of the U.S. in the realm of the Internet. In other words, it is the discourse they used that should be problematized.

CDA is the “analysis of dialectical relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices—discourse internalizes and is internalized by other elements without the different elements being reducible to each other” (Fairclough, 2001, p.3). In this regard, the method enables the author to engage with the texts and academic work and to uncover the imaginaries and power dynamics that are related to the discourses. Additionally, it allows the transcendence of persistent binarisms, like those between the ideal and the real, or the symbolic and the material (Banda, 2004).

In addition to its emphasis on power and hegemony, CDA examines the “historical roots of beliefs and practices and the structures and powerful actors that influence the adoption and continuation of beliefs and practices” (Wall, Stahl & Salam, 2015, p. 261). With this focus on history, CDA enables the author to assess the formation and context of the discourse in a bid to better understand the underlying power struggle. Identifying the powerful actors who contributed to the dominance of a discourse and their economic and political intentions is a process of empowering the marginalized group and ideas.

Finally, I understand that my own work, as all CDA researches, is “driven by social, economic and political motives like any other academic work” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 7). This acknowledgement means that in questioning the dominant discourse I do not speak from any privileged position. To the contrary, this acknowledgement highlights a feature of any critical thought in that there is no position that exists outside power relations and untouched by

historical contingency as a result of power relations and extant hegemonic forces that produce them. I position myself in a bid to gain a voice for Chinese scholars of Internet in China, whose views are often ignored or stigmatized in the scholarship, as well as to call for alternative frameworks to understand the Internet in China. In the thesis, I have tried to make my “position, research interests and values explicit” without feeling the need to apologize for my critical stance (p. 7).

Above all, CDA is an analytical research of discourses (e.g. written texts) which primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text in the social and political context. Thus, the ultimate goal of the analysis is to understand, expose, and resist inequality (Van Dijk, 2015). With this method, the thesis attempts to discover the real and the ideal, the reality and the imaginary, the inclusion and the exclusion, as well as the underlying power struggles by critically analyzing the selected written texts, deconstructing the dominant discourse into constituents, and turning to the historical contexts where the discourse has come into being. Moreover, discourse “is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration. ... discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 277). In this sense, the development discourse is introduced to further expose the unequal power relation, as previously established by the research in the international communication literature.

CHAPTER 4

A CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

The Myth of Great Fire Wall

A great amount of research on the Internet in China focused on the content regulation and censorship in China, and the catchphrase Great Firewall of China was invented and frequently used to refer and generalize the Chinese Internet. Studies have extensively explored the tools and methods employed by the Chinese government to control online content, and concluded that China has the most complicated online censorship systems (Qiu, 1999; Dowell, 2006; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Zittrain & Edelman, 2003; Lum, 2006). In this section, representative texts that tied to the dominant discourse will be analyzed.

For example, in the article *The Internet, Censorship, and China*¹, Dowell (2006) wrote:

The growth of the Internet has been so explosive in China that Internet boosters and pro-democracy advocates regularly predict that Beijing will ultimately lose its control over the Internet. That may happen eventually, but for the moment, Chinese authorities are proving unusually sophisticated at reining in the Internet's freewheeling nature. A principal strategy has been to create a gargantuan intranet for most of China and to link this intranet to the World Wide Web through carefully filtered portals. The system is often referred to as 'The Great Chinese Firewall' (p.113).

¹ The article is selected as the reference because it reflected major assumptions and arguments related to the dominant discourse.

Dowell tended to believe that the growth of the Internet in China would eventually undermine the Chinese government, but in the face of the “unpleasant” reality, he blamed the Internet control for delaying that democratic trend. The assumption is that the internet is a democratic force that ultimately leads to the western democracy regardless of the specific context, be it China or other non-western countries. But when that promise failed, he resorted to the specific context in China that he had ignored before, e.g. the internet control from the government, to explain the failure of the Internet, which is supposed to free the Chinese. The argument seems self-contradictory and subjective, ignoring the fact that the context existed before the introduction of the Internet in China.

This determinist view of technology contributes to the belief that the non-democratic government in China may either fall through the adoption of the Internet or compromise its modernization process by controlling the Internet: “while Beijing is doing its best to create a uniform, well-behaved culture that will not make waves, the rest of the world is discovering resources that it previously never knew existed” (p.114). But when the reality contradicted such belief, he thought the “unusually sophisticated” system, the so-called Great Chinese Firewall, was the barrier that stopped the democratic process. When other scholars followed the same logic to explain the situation in China, the Great Chinese Firewall gradually became a myth and a catchphrase to simplify the issue.

In the following part of the article, Dowell (2006) stated:

The eagerness of the Bush administration as well as private employers to eavesdrop on Internet has bolstered the Chinese government's argument that it is only doing what is necessary to protect its own security (p. 114).

In the west these Chinese machinations are often viewed as just another self-defeating series of gestures from a retrograde gerontocracy... Obviously, the personal survival of political cadre, who fear that they are mentally and physical unable to keep up with the pace of modernization, is also a compelling factor (p.115).

The two statements above presented and contrasted the online surveillance and censorship respectively conducted by the U.S. and China. But it seems that Dowell viewed the U.S. surveillance less evil than the censorship as he used the word machinations, self-defeating, and retrograde to describe China's deeds. The author clearly put the U.S. in a superior position to China in terms of their approach to the control of information flow. The statement masked a simple fact that, "every state regulates the flow of information within and across its border to some degree; and every government surveils its citizenry through various mechanism" (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 203). For example, China censors political sensitive messages on the internet while U.S. regulates the child pornography and sharing copyrighted materials. I have no grievances about pointing out the wrong-doings of the government and I have no intention to argue which one is more evil. But the question is whose approach is normalized, against which others are being assessed, whose value is chosen as the benchmark, and who has the power to decide.

In addition, Dowell (2006) maintained, "Instead of opening up China to free thought, the enormous attraction of the Chinese market appears to be corrupting Western companies" (p.112). Here, Western Internet companies are depicted more than profit-driven organizations but the

missionary that supposes to spread and defend western values and ideology. It seemed to Dowell that the companies' failure (conforming to Chinese internet regulation) to satisfy the expectation (making China freer) was not because of their profit-seeking nature, but because of the manipulative Chinese government as well as the contagious environment. On the other hand, the issue should be further problematized. For example, what are the typical practices of these companies regarding information control both at home and abroad? Do companies stand up against their own government's request of surrendering private information? Should companies be governed by local laws or the laws at home? In such cases, would comparative studies be more compelling to reach any conclusion? Then, again the question would be what the normative standards are.

Moreover, in terms of the relation between Chinese government and the Western internet companies, the Google-China conflict stands as a frequently quoted case. In January 2010, Google announced that it would reconsider its presence in China because a sophisticated hacking was launched towards the company from China. The company's Chief Legal Official stated, "we have decided we are no longer willing to continue censoring our results on Google.cn...we recognized that this may as well mean having to shut down Google.cn" (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 184). The company was praised as, "a champion for free speech" for its decision to challenge China's censorship law. After the incident, Google partnered with National Security Agency (NSA), whose primary task is intelligence gathering, to patch its network and track

down the culprit for the hacking. It is beyond the scope of the study to investigate the cause, but it should be noted, “despite the outrage over allegations of China’s hacking into major American companies, as it turned out, the NSA was doing similar things, and more” (p. 186).

So far, I have used Dowell’s article as a major example to present and examine the narratives that appeared frequently in the dominant discourse. Now we will continue to discuss how the Great Firewall myth was reinforced and maintained, and how reality has been partially presented or even distorted. Additionally, the author intends to expose how Dowell’s assumption and arguments have been circulated in the scholarship in the following part. Endeshaw (2004) predicted that, “China is fighting a losing battle...its fixation with shutting out the Internet as a means of mass communication and flow of information will only shorten the days of the dictatorship” (p. 41). Although the censorship technologies and regulations are “mechanisms to ensure full conformity and discipline to control the Internet freedom of Internet users,” with free access to any information, educated Internet users in China would pose threat to the stability and legitimacy of the Chinese communist’s regime (Yang, 2011, p. 105). Yang pictured Chinese government as the ruthless dictator who forbids people’s access to information because of the fear for losing power. This resonates with Dowell’s argument about China’s online censorship, “Obviously, the personal survival of political cadre, who fear that they are mentally and physically unable to keep up with the pace of modernization, is also a compelling factor” (Dowell, 2006, p.115).

It seems that the actions of the Chinese government are driven by the fear of losing power; the Chinese leaders are repressive and also incompetent of adapting to the new situation, and they are willing to compromise China's modernization process. At the same time, the Chinese government appears to be quite effective and competent in terms of coming up with different ways of censorship. Such descriptions to some degree contradicted the claim that Beijing attempted to use Internet as a tool to drive China's economy and improve people's livelihood, and thus boost its authoritarian legitimacy (Jiang, 2010).

In addition to this interesting depiction of the Chinese government, other scholars used online cases or practices to either celebrate the netizens' success in fighting with the government or criticize Chinese government's human rights abuse. Yang (2011) used the aborted the Green Dam censor-ware project to show that a net-based civil society is rapidly emerging and began to affect Chinese politics. In 2009, the government proposed that the monitoring software should be pre-installed in every home computer sold in China to allow parents to protect their youths from harmful online information, which spurred heated discussions online in terms of personal privacy, effectiveness of the software, government corruption that involved in the project, etc. In the end, the government decided to terminate the project. The study tended to highlight the power of the society to fight against another governmental attempt to enlarge the scope of censorship.

Qiang (2011) stated, “the government’s pervasive and intrusive censorship has stirred resentment among Chinese netizens, sparking new forms of social resistance and demands for greater freedom of information and expression, often conveyed via coded language and metaphors.” In addition, the narratives often highlighted and praised the role of the so-called “information broker,” those who are tech-savvy and know how to get around the Great Firewall to spread censored content to larger amount of online readers in China (p.52-53). The author depicted the Internet in China as a “contested space” where the censorship from the government and the “digital resistance” from the netizens produced mixed results.

In both cases, Chinese netizens were depicted as political dissidents who fight for free expression in various ways and dare to stand up against the corrupted government. As a result, “the academic analysis of the internet in China has become bogged down in the ubiquitous yet increasing stale debate between digital-activism and cyber-censorship - the good versus evil struggle between the internet's liberating potential and the Chinese party-state’s ongoing efforts at thought-control” (Leibold, 2011, p.1023).

In terms of the result for this battle, scholars differed in their opinions. Unlike Yang (2011) and Qiang (2011), Tsai (2016) held a relatively pessimistic view about the democratization prospect in China, and argued that the Chinese Communist Party has “successfully employed network technology to strengthen its ability to govern” (p. 14). Jiang (2010) also pointed out that Beijing has been successful in “gaining popular compliance and cementing its political rule” by

building and facilitating its legitimacy in economy, nationalism, ideology, culture, and governance, and will continue to implement an “Internet development and regulatory model” (p. 71). However, even though scholars concluded the online censorship in China “successfully has stifled people’s willingness to speak out,” they seemed reluctant to give up the hope in the long run: “the networking function of the internet could still bring incremental changes to the Chinese society through constructing loosely structured networks” (Shen, Wang, Guo, & Guo, 2009, p. 452). The Internet “has created a virtual classroom, that is otherwise unavailable, for Chinese people to start to learn what democracy means to them through their daily exchanges of idea and information” (Huang, 1990, p.145). Similarly, Qiang (2011) believed, “the Internet has become a training ground for citizen participation in public affairs”, creating a better informed and more engaged public that is ready to grab more power from the government (p. 60).

In terms of whether the Internet empowered the government or the netizens, Zheng (2008) noted that scholars in both camps have their own logic and empirical data to support their claims. And the cause for the differences was attributed to the underlying assumption among these scholars: “Internet development is a zero-sum game between the state and the society” (p. 10). The dichotomous portrayals of the Chinese Internet between the government and netizens continue to thrive regardless of the fact that Internet companies participate in censorship and the self-restraint of Chinese internet users (Yu, 2007).

However, empirical research generally suggested an opposite situation where Chinese netizens are not censorship opponents but rather supporters. Liang (2007) reported that government regulations on the internet has always been considered essential or relatively essential in China. The approving rate of the Internet regulation (content regulation included)² in 2003, 2005, and 2007 are respectively 86.1%, 82.4%, and 82.7%. In fact, 84.8% of survey respondents believed that the government should be the main body to regulate the internet. According to *Economist* (2013), similarly, 85% of Chinese netizens support government control and management of internet control, which seemed draconian to the Westerners. Additionally, Herold (2018) observed that, Chinese young people are apolitical and “too preoccupied with the internet playing online games, ordering food or hiring taxi rides online, writing or reading novels, conducting business, etc., to worry much about politics or free speech”. Thus, they need “the internet to function reliably and safely for work and play, and hence want greater, rather than reduced, government control over the internet” (p. 71).

Through the case study analysis, Jiang (2012) concluded that the blogging censorship in China is mainly self-implemented and enforcing mechanisms are rarely needed; political-satire blogs that criticize the government have a relatively large number of readers, but the interest is

² Although not all regulations are about content (e.g., technical specifications and management), regulation in this thesis refers to content regulation, which constitutes a major part of China’s overall internet regulation. Many Chinese laws and regulations include specific requirements for the content posted on the Internet. For example, the Provisions on the Administration of Internet Post and Comment Service Regulations published in 2017 stipulates that users shall not publish contents that are forbidden by laws and regulations.

for entertainment; political dissents exist on China's blogspace but the readership is rather small (p. 21). Additionally, Herold (2013) conducted interviews with Chinese college students in Shanghai and the results showed that students view the Internet as the space where they could express themselves more freely, "even if they had to be creative not to run afoul of government regulations" (p. 3). Also, the students expressed wishes for the increase of government control and internet regulation to better enjoy the online freedom.

These studies revealed that the relation between Chinese government and the netizens was quite different from what was assumed by the West. Jiang (2012) noted that, "China's well-known Internet censorship practices, considered as a threat to freedom of expression in the West, seem not to be so in the minds of many young Chinese bloggers, whose national loyalty, ironically, has only been enflamed by Western surveillance" (p. 14). The study suggested there is a difference between the West and China in attitudes towards the Internet governance, and such differences led to frustrations on both sides, especially when one side decides to understand the other from its own values and perspectives.

In the case of the Massage Milk hoax, the blog owner Wang Xiaofeng shut down the blog and announced his blog would be temporarily closed due to unavoidable reasons. After this happened, the Western journalists and bloggers spread the message and condemned the shutdown as another repression from the Chinese government. However, Wang Xiaofeng clarified later that it was not a government act and he himself shut down the blog to "make a

point about freedom of speech—just one directed at the West instead of at Beijing...the hoax was designed to give foreign media a lesson that Chinese affairs are not always the way you think” (Fowler & Qin, 2006). The blog owner also said, “I just want to make fun of Western journalists...I thought if I closed my blog, it would stir their imagination and they then would begin blah blah. It really is as expected” (Mackinnon, 2006). Jiang (2012) believed that the hoax is a demonstration of Chinese bloggers’ “resentment of Western criticism of Chinese censorship issues” (p. 11).

Hu Yong argued that Internet has an impact on expression in China, but these changes cannot be understood through the lens of western democratic ideals. Hu admitted that the Chinese government places strict control on the Internet, but the control was much more nuanced than that was criticized by the West. “When China’s Internet is unable to realize the democratic results they (the westerners) envision, these activists feel angry and cannot understand. All they can see are the negative factors of the Chinese internet, and it becomes easy to overlook the ways in which the Internet has significantly expanded space for free expression” (as cited in Shirk, 2011). Zhao (2008) attributed the ideological root of the democracy-driven discourse to the presumption that “the United States is by nature a beacon for and enabler of democracy in the rest of the world ... moreover, firewall technologies and electronic surveillance are not developed and deployed in the United States itself for proprietary, labor, and broad social control in the first place” (p. 144).

The dominant Internet Freedom discourse not only failed to interpret the Internet in China, but also gave rise to the “Evil behind the Great Fire Wall” myth, contributing to the simplistic understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the notorious label, the Great Fire Wall is far from a tight wall that blocks innovation, smothers business, and shuts down online discussions. Zheng (2008) pointed out that it is problematic to assume, “the Internet development is a zero sum between the state and the society” (p. 10). The assumed dichotomy between the state and the society reinforced the repressive nature of the Great Firewall in people’s imaginaries. Under such narratives, any social conflict or problem discussed on the Internet in China become the symbol of civic resistance towards digital oppression from the government rather than a way of solving their real problems. Any solution or reaction from the government towards online discussion is viewed as retreat by the government because it fears losing power, signaling another step towards China’s democratization with the power of netizens. However, the contradiction in such a discourse lies in the fact that if government control is draconian and frightens the citizens, how could the Internet bring freedom to a frightened public? The contradiction is pointed out by Lagerkvist (2006) in terms of a parallel of growth: the growth of freedom runs parallel to the growth of control of the Internet.

From the analysis above, one could easily see that the Internet Freedom/democracy discourse is inadequate to interpret the complexity of the Internet in China, and the scholars have to either revise the conclusion or the premise to justify their argument. Arguably, the promise of

the democratization discourse has significantly influenced hopes and expectations for the Internet in China. Scholars narrowed their vision and understanding under the dominant discourse: if democracy is yet to take place in China, it must be either the Chinese government is too brutal and cunning, or the netizens still need time to be fully trained and informed by the Internet to fight for freedom.

In this section, I have tried to demystify the Great Fire Wall and problematize all the contradictory arguments under the dominant discourse. As scholars repeatedly linked the Internet to free flow of information, freedom of expression, and human rights in their arguments, the author intends to further investigate why and how these concepts have been historically incorporated into the dominant discourse in a bid to discover powerful actors that influence the adoption and continuation of the beliefs, and thus to further unpack the dominant discourse.

Historicizing the Dominant Discourse

The dominant paradigm is built on a set of core assumptions, views and political discourse. In this part, the thesis provides a critical analysis of the components of the dominant discourse, “Internet freedom as a liberal democratic discourse.” There are three main components to this framework: free flow of information, freedom of speech, and human rights. Each one is discussed in detail below.

Free flow of information

Free flow of information components has two parts to it. While the first is informed by an economic perspective, the second is grounded in a political perspective. In the economic perspective, the relationship between information and economic growth was identified by economic historians, suggesting that communication is “the key to economic development” and information flow “may be viewed as a predictor of growth” (Easterbrook, 1960, p. 562). And this shift of placing communication at the center of economic analysis is “a pronounced shift in vantage point” (p. 559). And by focusing on the economics of information, the politics of the information has been downplayed. The commercialization process of the information served as a powerful rhetorical tool in trade policy negotiations worldwide, linking the information freedom with the free trade. “The latter third of nineteenth century saw the ‘free flow’ of information, ironically, entering international discourse” as U.S. complained that it “had been dealt out of a European cartel of international news agencies” (Braman, 2002).

“The decisive role played by the British worldwide communication network...promoted its advantages and insulated it from external assault had not escaped the attention in the United States”, and the American offensive mounted and availed “itself of the virtuous language and the praiseworthy objectives of the free flow of information and worldwide access to news” (Schiller, 1975, p. 76). Thus, the free flow of information became “an integral part of US foreign policy” of breaking down the barriers for American news agencies, magazines, and other media to

expand throughout the world (Benson, 1946). Additionally, John Foster Dulles, one of the chief American architects of the Cold War, stated that, “if I were to be granted one point in foreign policy and no other, I would make it the free flow of information” (Schiller, 1975, p. 78).

The “free flow of information” is informed by a political component as well. It is clear that the economic aspects of the free flow of information was intertwined with the political considerations. Schiller (1975) argued that the coincidence of the policy of free flow of information and U.S. imperial ascendancy was not accidental. And the former served as one of “the very few indispensable prerequisites” for the latter. After the World War II, the U.S. began to promote free trade and “free flow” of information for its economic interest and global hegemony. Furthermore, the “free flow” of information concept was lifted to the highest level of national and international principles by big U.S. press associations and publishers through remarkable political campaigns, rallying the public to support “a commercial goal expressed as ethical imperatives”. What’s more, the media disclosed neither the “self-severing nature” nor its political implications of this widely-proclaimed principle to the public (p. 75-78).

Braman (2002) noted that in both global trade and politics, “freedom” was meant to similarly apply to different nation-states regardless of their cultures, socio-economic conditions, or international standing. And such “freedom” was to the disadvantage of the developing countries, and signaled U.S.’s overall rejection of cultural, social or political assessment of information flows across borders. Nordenstreng (2011) also suggested that freedom was

employed as “an ideological device in concepts such as ‘free media’ and ‘free marketplace of ideas’” (p.79). In addition, the discourses on international information flow was about “value hierarchies ranking” among nation-states. The harmonization viewed by the US is referred to as the extra-territorial exercise of power by others (Braman, 2002). Schiller (1975) maintained the “free flow” of information issue provided U.S. policymakers a strong “cultural argument with which to create suspicion about an alternative form of social organization, weakening the enormous popular interest in Europe and Asia at war’s end for one or another varieties of socialism” (p.78). U.S. government and corporations domestically incorporated the “free flow” into the cultural and ideological systems to reinforce its political and commercial interests, creating the antagonist blocs in terms of information flow, the “freedom” camp and the rest.

Freedom of speech

Though the free flow of information hardly gained wide international support, the United States was the primary beneficiary of the existing “free flow” arrangement, as showed by that fact that American-made media products and U.S. informational networks spread across the world. However, in the early 1970s, the international community developed a new attitude toward information freedom which was based on their concerns about national sovereignty and cultural imperialism. On the other hand, the UNESCO noticeably turned away from its previous unquestioning support for free flow of information and advocated that prior agreements should

be reached between the country transmitting the messages and the receiving parties. In November 1972, this idea was supported by a vote of 102 to 1 in the United Nations General Assembly—the single dissenting vote came from the United States (Schiller, 1975). Facing a backlash from the international community, the private communications sector in the United States responded with hostility. They found that censorship was being imposed by granting “the rights of nations to control the character of the messages transmitted into their territories,” which was both “dangerous and a gross violation of the United States Constitution’s provision for freedom of speech” (p. 84). Schiller (1975) also suggested that considering the United States Constitution as applicable to the entire international community was not only a display of arrogance but also a misinterpretation of the free speech conception, which assumed that individuals’ freedom of speech could be extended to multinational corporations. However, granting such freedom to transnational corporations was “substantially oppressive” since it only reinforced the imbalance of information flows between the South and the North, and worsened the unequal relationship in the global and transnational competition. The “free flow” of information notion falsely implied to offer generalized and equal opportunities to all individuals and entities but in essence it only favored those who already had comparative or first-move advantages.

Human rights

In 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council declared that the internet freedom was a human right and released the resolution on “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of human rights on the internet”, which advocated all states to facilitate access to the Internet, and ensure that the rights of freedom of expression are protected online. The United States was the early champion for the human rights aspect of the internet freedom. Carr (2016) stated that, early in 2010, the United States under the Obama administration already linked the internet to human rights. The former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton viewed Internet as a new site for fighting human rights abuses, believing the freedom of assembly in cyberspace is grounded in what she called the “freedom to connect.” She stated that, “I talked about how we must find ways to make human rights a reality. Today, we find an urgent need to protect these freedoms on the digital frontiers” (Clinton, 2010). In her view, communication technology is crucial to promote free flow of information and to reduce human rights abuses. “We want to put these (technological) tools in the hands of people who will use them to advocate democracy and human rights” (Clinton, 2010). However, as Carr (2013) argued, Internet freedom should not only be understood as the “promotion of human rights or of a normative ‘public good’, but also as an expression of state power,” and that “this human right is not as universal as some”. Unlike basic human rights such as food and shelter, the right to Internet freedom is “contingent”, “deeply political” and “remains subjective and contextual” (Carr, 2013, p. 6).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognized the intellectual property rights as a human right in 1948 and caused controversies between developed and developing countries. Gana (1996) argued this resolution was “inconsistent with a human rights recognition of a collective right to development and insupportable under the core ideals of human rights ideology” (p. 317). He was critical of treating the intellectual property protection as a universal ideal under the human rights framework and maintained that it endorsed a system that perpetuates the “subordination of values and ideals of societies in developing countries to the economic interests of countries in the Western Hemisphere” (p. 318). From the view of developing countries, technology transfer proved to a false promise to quick development and industrialization, which reinforced their technological dependence. In that context, international intellectual property systems were viewed as an impediment to technological development.

In spite of such acknowledgement, developing countries were encouraged to establish intellectual property laws similar to the those of western countries. Facing the inequalities, Gana (1996) also suggested that the determination of the “fundamental” human rights was “culturally contingent” and “articulation of human rights norms in a way that reflects values that derive from specific historical and cultural contexts lends those norms a moral force.” In this sense, the modern intellectual property system rooted in western history and society reflected western values. Therefore, “to impose these values upon a group of people is a gross violation of their human rights as a collective” (p. 341).

Based on the ongoing discussion, “American’s ‘free flow’ doctrine is a strategic vision to legitimize a specific geopolitical agenda of networking the world in ways that disproportionately benefit Western governments and economies” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 203). Attaching political and economic agenda to the “universal” values made it difficult to challenge the dominant discourse but revealing the historical roots of the emergence of such discourse and its components help delegitimize its moral force. The right to development should not be ignored from the international discourse or treated less to freedom of expression or other human rights alleged by developed countries. “The enjoyment of freedom of expression must be seen in conjunction with the whole human rights regime pertaining to multiple dimensions and context of social life” (Jørgensen, 2011, p. 105). One should separate the US doctrine of the internet freedom from the virtuous defense of freedom of expression, which lends moral and ethical force to the “internet freedom” rhetoric (Powers & Jablonski, 2015).

As the internet was born in the West during the Cold War, it inevitably was imprinted with Western values and the Cold War rhetoric of ideological confrontation. I argue the current dominant discourse of the Internet in China is an extension of a perceived larger ideological conflict between the West and China as well as the global power struggle that accompanies such ideological conflict. The current outcry of the “great firewall of China” mirrors the earlier concerns with “free flow of information” in the Cold War era, which served both economic and political purposes of Western powers, and helped them “ensure the continuing and

unreciprocated influence of Western media on global markets” (Thussu, 2000, p.56). Thus, the hegemony of US maintained through establishing the new antagonism between “Internet freedom” and “control of information” based on presumed Western values of “freedom” and “human rights”. Through a detailed analysis, this research intends to unpack this ongoing politicization process and explain why it stubbornly exists in the current literature. I argue that Chinese scholarship should be given more attention in future China internet studies to achieve a more balanced perspective. And the internet in China should be studied in its own context rather than within the western assumptions and discourses.

In the section, I have historically tracked the economic and political roots of the components and recurring themes in the dominant discourse to demonstrate it was by no means the pursuit of great humanistic values, but rather was always charged with political and economic motives in favor of the United States and the West. Following the historical logic, “discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier.” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 277), I introduce the previous development discourse to help better understand the underlying power structure.

Paradigm Shift: From Development to Internet Freedom

After we have examined the simplistic interpretations and the economic and historical motivations underlying the dominant discourse, the author intends to further examine the power struggles by starting the section with the following statement:

the question of whether the Internet will democratize China implies an essentially Western-centric view that treats China as the inscrutable and inferior “other” waiting to be converted to “one of us.” This is not to deny the universal appeal of democracy as a desirable goal for China to pursue, but to acknowledge the power relationship embedded in setting the agenda for China Internet research. Under the orientalist gaze of Western scholars and policy makers, the Internet is expected to be the newest tool for taming the “beast” in the East. Just like it was earlier with satellite TV, which was lauded by Rupert Murdoch as being able to tumble any authoritarian regime, now the hope is put on the Internet to provide for a “free flow of information.” (Meng, 2010, p. 502)

Meng’s argument could easily remind us that the Internet Freedom is just another criterion that was constructed by the West to categorize the rest as the inferior, forced them to accept western standards and values, and thus to maintain its hegemony. In the post-war era, as new states were born or independent from colonial rulers, the development and modernization theories/paradigm emerged in the 1950s, which also continued in the 1960s. Semati (2004) pointed out the following chief reasons for the emergence of such paradigm: the formation of new states, the experience of economic growth in western nations, the interest of the U.S. and Europe in studying other parts of the world, and the influence of the United States in bringing the less industrialized countries into the dominant capitalist social and economic system. The development paradigm “provided the theoretical language for U.S. foreign policy and its Cold War ideological confrontations” (p. 7-8). Under the paradigm, the world was divided into “traditional” and “developed” societies. The goal of development was to promote the transformations of traditional societies into western-like societies. Arguably, it believes communications and mass media would play a crucial role in the process.

Lerner (1958) characterized the mass media as a “mobility multiplier” which enables people from traditional society to contact with the outside world, see other ways of living, and finally aspire to modernity. Lerner argued the western society provided “the most developed model of societal attributes” and “from the West came the stimuli which undermined traditional society that will operate efficiently in the world today, the west is still a useful model” (p. 47). Schramm seconded Lerner’s argument and viewed the mass media as a “bridge to a wider world”: mass media served as channels to transfer new ideas and models from the North to the South, the developed to the underdeveloped (1964). For Schramm, mass media can “raise the aspirations of the peoples in developing countries” (Thussu, 2000, p. 57). It was assumed that with more media exposure, people will become more willing to change the traditional lifestyle and adopt the Western way of life. However, this paradigm was criticized for the dichotomy of modern and tradition and “ethnocentric worldview and its neglect of external factors for underdevelopment” (Semati, 2000, p.8). Despite the criticism, after guiding both national and international programs through the 1960s. the paradigm “resurfaced in the 1980s with a focus on telecommunication and in the 1990s under the comprehensive label information and communication technologies for development” (Hanson, 2017, p. 10).

In parallel to the earlier development discourse, the Internet Freedom discourse viewed that the Internet is crucial to the democratization process just as the mass communication is helpful to modernization. Broadly, we could think the Internet Freedom discourse as the continuation of the

development discourse, but distinctions exist in terms of their emphasis and context. Both discourses are associated with the western ideology and values. Both constructed dichotomies to enhance the authority of the West over the rest of the world. In the development discourse, the world was divided into the developed and the underdeveloped, while in the internet freedom discourse, freedom and censorship are depicted as mutually exclusive, which is hardly true in reality. Similarly, online censorship/internet freedom should also be considered as inventions rather than reality: “every state regulates the flow of information within and across its border to some degree; and every government surveils its citizenry through various mechanism” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 203).

Additionally, the notion “Third World” was constructed “in a specific period of the western colonialism faced challenges in continuing its domination over the subject countries” (Banda, 2004, p. 98). The development discourse prioritized the economic growth and material modernity in the time when the U.S. was in the golden age of economic prosperity. But now as the economic influence of the U.S. has been undermined by the slowing growth and the rise of new economic powers like China, the development discourse gives the way to the Internet freedom discourse to set up new standards, that China seemingly fails to satisfy. “Censorship” was constructed to exclude China and other non-western states from the “freedom” camp. By doing this, the U.S. regain its authority and hegemonic position as the champion of Internet freedom. This time, it aims to spur people’s aspiration for freedom in those countries instead of

the wealth and material modernity. Therefore, the Internet Freedom is a construction of the U.S. to continue the hegemony in today's world, where the U.S.'s economic influence is declining.

According Fairclough and Wodak (1997), "Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration... discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier" (p. 277). In this section, we have compared the development discourse with the Internet freedom discourse to expose the long-standing power struggles and the western "tradition" of the exclusion game. In the next chapter, we will contextualize the dominant paradigm and examine the geopolitics of the Internet to further complete the analysis of power and hegemony.

CHAPTER 5

GEOPOLITICS OF THE DOMINANT PARADIGM

According to Morozov (2011), “Politically, the Internet is not a neutral space and America’s foreign policy carries all of its historical baggage to cyberspace with it” (p. 897). The mid-1990s witnessed the insufficiency of internet governance featured by difficulties of new domain name registrations and internet protocol (IP) addresses and disputes over conflicted names. Out of the concern about negative implications for its economic power, US established the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in 1998 to administer internet governance both in the US and globally. Carr (2016) argued that this institution highlighted the “hegemonic control over internet governance which profoundly shaped the way the Internet works today” (p. 118).

Early in 1995, former president of Intelsat Irving Goldstein predicted that information to the twenty-first century was what oil and gas were to the beginning of the twentieth century, and it would fuel economic and political power. As the “information is resource” rhetoric enters in the international discourse, “nation states act quickly to build, secure, and control the infrastructure that enable information to flow from one nation to another” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 75).

However, these contests between the developed and developing countries over information were depicted differently. In the West, “they are typically framed in the context of freedom expression, protection of intellectual property rights, and national security.” Foreign policies implemented by “non-western states to better monitor or control the flow of information are characterized as effects at state censorship, antidemocratic, and contrary to fundamental human rights codified in international law” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 3). Winseck (2017) argued “the ‘internet freedom’ agenda lends itself to the idea that US internet hegemony is promoted and girded by US foreign policy” (p. 228).

The discourses around the Internet freedom serves to maintain the hegemonic position of the U.S. in the new competition for soft power. “Portraying efforts to control the flow of information via crude policy mechanisms as censorship normalizes the status quo, portraying the existing communication infrastructures and policies as preserving the global citizen’s freedom to connect” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 3). The rhetorical power of “freedom” and “human rights” guarded the moral high ground of the United States and created insurmountable barriers for nations like China that intend to challenge that status quo and attempt to control information flows across the borders. The ideological and value aspects not only concealed the geo-political interests but also further strengthen the existing power structure.

The impression of incompatibility between “internet freedom” and information control is false and in reality the assumed “internet freedom” is not free or immune from information

control. To ensure the sovereignty in the digital age, all states increasingly use information control as effective means. “Despite substantial variation in policy, China and the United States are developing culturally specific, incremental and advanced strategies for controlling internet access” and even though their “level of control is drastically different, their strategies are quite similar analytically” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p.73).

As a result, the World Wide Web becomes “a global network of big and small spiders and their respective webs linked together in networks” and “each spider regulates the infrastructures and content of its section of the web within its political, social, cultural, and economic values” (Eko, 2001, p. 482). As an example, China “is creating a network moving away from the Internet in the West, not only in the language but also in its values and deep architecture” (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 184). Different visions of the Internet would lead to architectural and functional differences. We have already witnessed the distinctive trends in the design of the western and Chinese apps: the western apps tend to serve one specific function while the Chinese apps always integrate multiple functions. It is likely that online bifurcation, as predicted by Google’s CEO Eric Schmidt, will take place in the near future: two distinct internets led by the U.S. and China (Kolodny, 2018).

Internet technology is not a vehicle of democracy but rather “an expression of political decision about power” (Carr, 2016, p. 189). China and the United States are going to implement different ways to develop, manage, and regulate the Internet. By doing this, they will “attract

other nations to choose among models of control ranging from the United States' relatively free and open model to China's model of political control. The result is the beginning of a technological version of the cold war, with each side pushing its own vision of the Internet's future" (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006, p. 184). In the future, the notions of information sovereignty and internet freedom will continue to compete on the international level. While the internet freedom serves to "legitimize a specific geopolitical agenda of networking the world in ways that disproportionately benefits Western governments and economies," the information sovereignty also attempts to legitimize the state's control in the digital age (Powers & Jablonski, 2015. p. 203). It seems that "the real cyber war" has just started and the power struggle never rests.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argued that the politicization of Chinese internet in western scholarship was aligned with the geo-political interests of the United States. The argument intended to answer the major inquiry of the thesis - - what explains the proliferation and the ascendancy of the dominant discourse (RQ 4). The dominant Internet freedom/liberal democracy discourse adopted repeatedly by western scholars to understand the Internet in China is inaccurate and inadequate to explain the complicated and complex reality of Internet in China and that such a discourse contributes to the Great Firewall myth. As the internet was born in the West during the Cold War, it inevitably was imprinted with Western values and the Cold War rhetoric of ideological confrontation. I argued the current dominant discourse of the Internet in China is an extension of a perceived larger ideological conflict between the West and China as well as the global power struggle that accompanies such ideological conflict. The Internet freedom discourse, historically driven by the economic and political interests of the West, bears a resemblance to post-colonial development discourse. Both discourses are associated with a powerful western ideology that legitimizes its intervention and domination over the rest of the world. While the development

discourse focused on economic growth, the internet freedom discourse, which includes the free flow of information, freedom of expression, and human rights components, resorts to the values and ideology in the new context where the U.S. economy is in decline, serving as a rhetoric to justify the continuation of the U.S. hegemony.

I started with identifying the politicization tendency in western scholarship on the Internet in China and explored alternative discourses to the dominant one to show China's internet should not be reduced to only a one-dimensional discussion of a politicized object in academic or popular discourses. The review of reviews and articles found through the database search confirm the existence of the dominant discourse in writings about Internet in China (RQ 1) and alternative discourses including the development discourse, the nationalist discourse, the netizen participation discourse, and the user addiction discourse (RQ 2). The dominant discourse was assembled out of three major components: the free flow of information, freedom of speech and human rights, in accordance with how each concept was integrated into the discourse historically (RQ 3). With the inquiry of why this politicization tendency perpetuated, I adopted the CDA to problematize the dominant discourse and uncover the underlying power struggle. I analyzed selected texts to demystify the Great Firewall myth, historicized the major components of the dominant discourse to expose the geo-political motivations and commercial imperatives behind the "universal" Internet values championed by U.S., and tied the discourse to the previous development discourse. By doing this, I intended to "delegitimize the powerful and pervasive

rhetoric” concerning the internet freedom agenda and detach the discourse from “humanitarian and democratic ideals” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p. 6). At last, I contextualized the dominant discourse, and examined the geopolitics of the Internet to further complete my analysis of power and hegemony around discussions of the Internet.

The efforts by the United States to create a singular and universal internet built upon Western legal, political, and social preferences alongside the freedom agenda tends to extend its hegemony in the new information age. The creation of the value-based antagonism between the “Internet freedom” and the control of information (censorship) was an attempt to maintain the status quo and the extant power dynamics. In this sense, researchers should be cautious about using such a framework or discourse with underlying geo-strategic motivation and adopt a more critical view of global information flow.

In the case of China, politicization of its internet represents the denial of the material modernity that took place in China, despite of the fact that such result was advocated by the West within the development discourse. Replacing the accumulation of material goods as the criteria in the development discourse, “internet freedom” entered into the international discourse as an effective rhetoric to delegitimize China as a non-western superpower, thus attempting to maintain the status quo. In terms of the economic rise of China and other “third world” nations, it is in the interests of United States to redefine the boundaries between the “advanced/developed” and the “backward/undeveloped” and to emphasize other “criteria” (e.g. internet freedom) for

distinguishing the developed and undeveloped, depicting the other side as inferior or unethical.

By doing this, the Western modernity will remain the ideal and the only promising model for the rest of the world, contributing to its hegemony over the world.

In terms of the cyberspace, the creation of the binary between Internet freedom/democracy and censorship/anti-democracy is an attempt to normalize the status quo where the United States continues to benefit from the dominance over the Internet and the world communications systems. However, such binary existed only in the imagination of the public because in reality “the emergence of the information age and knowledge-based societies requires greater control of information to preserve government legitimacy and power projection” (Powers & Jablonski, 2015, p.3) and the United States and other western nations are no exception. In the language of internet freedom, the western model is presented as the ideal for others to follow regardless of their cultural and societal differences. The bundling of free flow of information, freedom of speech, and human rights created difficulties to refute the rhetoric and the underlying digital imperialism because on the surface they represent the highest humanistic values. For this reason, a distinction should be made between the internet freedom discourse and the true democratic values. In other words, the dominant discourse should be problematized.

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