

Historicizing Internet Use in China and the Problem of the User Figure

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The history of computing field has been witnessing a growing interest in studying people versus machines, the anonymous multitude versus “great men,” and everyday life versus science and business.¹ To those writing user-centric histories, China provides an opportunity to look at the profound implications of the underlying conceptions of the user figure and thus highlights the importance of the historian’s critical awareness.

Compared with many developed countries, China hasn’t had the Internet for long. It realized its first full-function connection to the World Wide Web only in 1994, through a 64-Kbyte international dedicated circuit provided by the American company Sprint. However, although rigorous scholarly histories on the subject are still in their infancy,² historical narratives about the Chinese Internet prevail in popular media, institutional reports, and scholarly works. This article will examine two major visions that generally organize these narratives. I will highlight the user figures underlying the two visions—the denial of any agent user and the presumption of a preformed liberal user—and further illustrate how such user conceptions hinder our historical understandings of Internet use and sociocultural changes.

Two Visions

In the first vision, which dominates accounts originating within China, the Internet is something the government puts to work as the centerpiece in the country’s economic development. The state’s sponsorship is viewed as an extension of China’s century-long appeal to techno-nationalism. In 1994, the Chinese government designated “going online” among that year’s 10 most significant national scientific and technological achievements. In a historical review of the Internet’s first 10 years in China, *Southern Weekly*, a well-regarded commercial and liberal-oriented newspaper, situates the boom of domestic Internet industry as part of an inevitable trend, in which “the information economy ... has been replacing traditional industries represented by petroleum, electricity, and mechanical engineering to be the mainstay of China’s national economy.”³

It is indeed an impressive arch of development. Unlike media globalization through older media, wherein images and stories flow from the West to the “Rest,”⁴ the Chinese quickly built an entire self-sufficient Web ecology, consisting of websites addressing

the full spectrum of everyday needs built for and by the Chinese. The country’s online population, which became the world’s largest in its eighth year, reached 668 million by late June 2015. Western societies have just begun to realize that the largest geolinguistic culture on the Web is probably Chinese.⁵

There is a dark side to all this. In 2001 when only 2 percent of China’s national populace made it to the Web, an infinite series of opaque content regulations began. In the same year, an international human rights organization reported on “China’s Golden Shield.”⁶ This system, first identified and named in English, later expanded to become the largest and most sophisticated censor in the world, now widely known as the Great Fire Wall of China (GFW). In the first email China ever sent out, in 1987 a Chinese scientist wrote this: “Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world.” The message has been pinpointed as an uncanny prophecy of the theme of oppression and resistance that runs along the history of the Chinese Internet.

This brings us to the second vision, which can be found in numerous media, policy-making, and academic accounts originating in the English-speaking world. This alternate view considers the Internet a means to promote resistance in China, an exhilarating ingredient in the ongoing contention between state and society. As the metaphor “open networks, closed regimes” expresses tellingly,⁷ the primary interest in the country’s oppressive state has conditioned how Internet usage has been approached. Changes in China’s online censorship regime and its coercive effects, on one side, and the innovative Internet use by citizens, journalists, and NGOs (nongovernment organizations) in response to control measures, on the other, are keenly documented in journalistic and scholarly writings—often at the exclusion of all else.

Two User Figures and the Gaps

The construction of the Chinese Internet’s past thus oscillates between two binary poles: we see a steady progression of a national information economy represented by institutional adjustments and statistical aggregations, or we see the oppressed user actively challenging and overcoming the objective structural constraints. This second pole involves a constant reiteration of the same theme: users appropriating newer technical means—first online forums, then

blogs, and now microblogs (such as Weibo)—to challenge the oppressive state.⁸ What have been left out are both the processes that are not oriented toward the practical ends of serving the Chinese authorities or the IT industry (which the first vision prioritizes) and those not part of oppositional politics (which the second focuses on). More importantly, there is a glaring gap regarding Internet use and sociocultural changes, which is a direct result of the prevalent conceptions of the Chinese user.

In the China-based historical narratives, one hardly sees any users. In the chronology published by the government-run China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which also monopolizes Internet statistics, all major events have to do with launching and reorganizing various institutions, establishing and propagating newer technologies, and releasing regulations.⁹ In the few instances where Internet use is featured, it is reported in support of the government. The viral spread of pornographic photos, for example, is portrayed as a trigger of public outrage demanding a “cleaner” Internet. Public participation online during natural disasters is depicted as evidence of national solidarity in the digital era. A comprehensive literature review of Chinese scholarly works published from 1989 to 2012 on the new technology found that about 80 percent have no discussion about “people.” Of the remaining 20 percent, 13 percent see people as consumers, and only 6 percent treat them as “agentic actors.”¹⁰

In contrast, the Chinese Internet users inherent in popular Western accounts are self-propelled liberal subjects, independent of their own past and ready to function as ideal citizens in formal liberal democracies. In line with a long tradition making sense of nondemocratic regimes, numerous media reports and academic studies on the Internet in China posit that obstacles to democratization are external, like the Berlin Wall during the Cold War or the “jamming” imposed by communist governments to prevent the “free world” radio broadcast from reaching its eager listeners under totalitarian rule. A great deal of attention, for example, is paid to the Great Fire Wall, affirming and valorizing the liberal user who is determined to overcome access blockage and gain more “political knowledge” by doing so. Recently, however, large-scale actual Web browsing data suggests the sheer majority of Chinese users do not fit this profile.¹¹

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As media researcher Lawrence Grossberg writes, a specific media user figure *becomes dominant* because it addresses a deeper crisis or longing. Therefore “[t]he very category [of the media user] changes as it moves across social, political, and historical space.”¹² In this light, the absence of human faces in Chinese-language narratives may be a function of an unspoken fear of disturbances and divergence from the state-planned development of Chinese information society. In my opinion, the prevalence of a preformed liberal user in West-based accounts results from a definitive vision for China’s political future—a formal democracy—and the belief in the crucial role of communication technologies in its formulation.

Toward Lived Experiences

Neither the denial of an agentic user figure nor the assumption of users as preformed liberal subjects allows us to examine the personal transformations in values, outlooks, and practices and the resultant sociocultural changes. Both hinder our understanding of how the Internet intersects with, influences, and is influenced by wider Chinese society. Individuals engage with the Internet in ways that depend on, as well as affect, their lived experiences fraught with thoughts, desires, and aspirations, which are all rooted in local contexts over an extended period of time. We need new conceptions of the Chinese user that take these into proper account.

Such user-centric historical inquiries face further methodological challenges because the materials that are most convenient to collect and analyze—institutional archives, various online texts, and responses to online surveys—offer us limited insight. Instead, we need more “vertical” data such as oral

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histories that center on the same group of users. The methodological value of oral histories is especially high when the region under consideration contains vast heterogeneity yet tends to be shown through powerful ideological lenses. Using this method, for example, my research traces life trajectories of ordinary Chinese users, bringing their socially constituted reading practices across print and cyberspace to the foreground. This approach helps render what the broader developments in technology and media ecology mean to real, situated human actors and thus complicates the current narratives regarding the cultural and political impact of the Internet in nonliberal societies.¹³

References and Notes

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