The Emperor's Internet: An Evaluation of Online Content Control in China During Xi Jinping's Rule

Sruthi Kalyani A[1]
[1]*PhD Candidate, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

Abstract: **This paper evaluates the evolution of online content control in China under Xi Jinping, highlighting the shift from fragmented to centralized governance. Historically described as 'fragmented authoritarianism', China's governance structures have adapted to the complexities of internet control, evolving into what now is termed as 'networked authoritarianism'. Xi Jinping's era, however, has witnessed a pronounced centralization of power, consolidating internet governance under the Cyberspace Administration Commission (CAC). This shift has been accompanied by a series of legal and institutional reforms aimed at tightening censorship and asserting cyber sovereignty, employing methods that range from surveillance and content filtering to algorithmic moderation and criminal penalties for dissent. The study draws on theoretical frameworks, policy documents, and recent events to analyze this transition and its implications. The paper argues that while China's centralized control bolsters regime legitimacy and strengthens state power, it also heightens the "dictator's dilemma," as excessive repression risks alienating citizens and stifling public sentiment. The paper concludes by examining the geopolitical ramifications of China's assertive cyber-diplomacy and its quest to reshape global internet governance, cautioning against the broader implications for democratic freedoms and international norms.**

***Index Terms*—China, online censorship, internet governance, Xi Jinping, fragmented authoritarianism,**

INTRODUCTION

"*Tian gao, huangdi yuan*" (The Heaven is High and the Emperor is far away) is an ancient Chinese adage that hints on the perils of an expanding Chinese imperial state where the emperor was practically not able to hold authority over the emerging layers of newer institutions and officials at the local level. Having been ordained to serve the mandate of Heaven, the emperor's position was so high (since heaven is high), and thus, he was far away and unreachable to maintain the day-to-day affairs of the state that concerned the public. The situation that existed in the imperial state was then compared to the fragmented polities that existed during the years of post-Mao China, where market-enabled forces of local autonomy, and bureaucratic bargaining created a fragmented polity altogether. The political system, thus called 'fragmented authoritarianism', has been used as a dominant model for studying the governance structure and institutionalization in the reform era. Fast forward to the era of the internet, where governance mechanisms are again overlapping, fragmented and layered at the same time. Governance of ubiquitous technologies by traditional authoritarian political structures needs careful scrutiny, given the serious challenges it may pose to the democratic system worldwide. This paper attempts to embark on the task of studying how China handles its internet. While absorbing how China's political system was once fragmented to invite the internet into being, the paper observes that the fragmented authoritarian model may not be a robust model in studying internet governance under the Xi Jinping era.

There are many facets to the broader term of 'cyberspace', each requiring extensive research in its own terms. To name a few, cyber-sovereignty, online content management, censorship state surveillance, cybersecurity (concerning data flows, encryption technologies, maintenance of cyber critical infrastructure, etc.), digital economy (digital trade, platform economies, etc.), management of new technologies (Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, disruptive technologies, automation, etc.), military informatization and intelligentisation, etc. come under the umbrella of cyber governance[1][2][10][13]. The paper limits itself to only one aspect of the internet – that is, China's online censorship, and attempts to study how Xi Jinping's era has restructured an otherwise fragmented structure in a way that the emperor is not far away from the everyday activities and control of the internet space.

The paper is divided into two major parts. In the first part, a critical review of the existing literature that suggests a fragmented and/or networked

authoritarian framework to study China's internet is carried out. It also analyses policy documents and official statements published by the PRC that can help us identify and understand the censorship patterns and cyber-sovereignty stands of China[10][7][13][15][17]. Studies that had extensively studied internet governance in China, especially during the Xi Jinping era, have been included and reviewed for the study. The second part of the paper covers an analysis of the institutional reorganization that changed the era of fragmented governance that existed before 2014 into a more centralized scheme. Drawing upon the recent enactments of stringent laws and tighter censorship scenarios after the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper stresses the dire implications that are borne out of dictatorship control of information and the internet. Parallelly, studying the statements of Xi that hint at his apprehensions towards US-led internet control, the geopolitical impacts of a Chinese new world order in cyberspace are prophesied in the analysis section. I conclude the paper with these observations of Xi Jinping's internet control and the dictator's dilemma that ensues due to his repressive tactics to gain centralized internet control[6][8].

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The paper starts with an academic search for suitable theoretical frameworks that would explain China's Internet governance. The internet, although seemingly expansive and beyond borders, is ultimately a political tool that is restrained and controlled by political systems. A possible heuristic to understand the ongoing cyberspace governance can be Lieberthal's framework of 'fragmented authoritarianism' (FA) [11]. Proposed in 1988, mainly implying the policy-making process during the reform era, this model observes how bureaucracy below the leadership level is disjointed and 'fragmented' such that the outcomes were determined by the conflicting interests of the various horizontal and vertical mechanisms that existed rather than by the actually intended policy motivations in itself. With increased decentralization that was furthered by market forces and formalization therewith, fragmented authoritarianism was to deal with the problem of allocation and distribution of resources and authority across institutions in the party-state bureaucratic structure. To actualize decision-making into reality, one needed "an agreement among an array of bodies where no single body has authority over others" [11]. This situation that encouraged bureaucratic entrepreneurship and bargaining is not a phenomenon that faded away in the 1980s. Scholars, even in the era of Xi Jinping, attempt to study the Chinese political system under the FA lens to explain the relationship between institutions and bargaining.

While FA is one model to understand Chinese polity, scholars, speaking specifically about how authoritarian regimes adjust to the emerging forces of technology and the internet, propose a version of authoritarianism called 'networked authoritarianism' (NA) [12]. The NA model defines online activism well and the role of grassroots organizations and civil societies that were empowered after the internet era. However, these voices of dissent questioning the regime are confined within the Great Firewall. Scholars such as Yongnian Zheng (2008) fear that an NA model where activism happens without the political rights of citizens will only result in regime consolidation rather than the overthrowing of the one party rule[19]. This pattern, which Zheng (2008) predicted in the 2000s, is now observed during Xi Jinping's rule. To control the challengers, the regime attempts to unite the forces of 'soft-liners' and 'hard-liners' and focus on deliberate venues to exercise political control. This sort of 'authoritarian deliberation' will only pave the way for an internet that will strengthen party power rather than infusing democratic ideals into society.

Min Jiang undertakes this idea of 'authoritarian deliberation' to understand the party's governing of the internet. Jiang conceptualizes four spaces that an increasingly plural and participative internet in China has created. They are – (1) Central Propaganda Spaces (such as government websites and state media) (2) Government-regulated Commercial spaces (that are subjected to state control, where foreign web content is filtered), (3) Emergent Civic Spaces (websites that non-commercial, mostly run by NGOs for civic activism, and (4) International deliberative spaces (that are outside the domain of Chinese jurisdiction[9]. She notes that the first two spaces are heavily party-controlled and mostly intrude on the public lives of citizens. By imposing intermediary liabilities to the other two spaces (3 and 4), networked authoritarianism is maintained such that these websites are made to 'self-discipline' themselves. By observing online activities in deliberate spaces, scholars such as Jiang and Zheng contend with the dominant belief that the internet would dilute authoritarianism. Rather, they see that

based on evidence, the internet in China helped in party legitimacy and regime consolidation more than instilling democratic activism in internet users[9][19].

Following the NA model, Tsai (2016) is also of the same view that internet governance has not reaped any democratic values within Chinese society. By looking into the aggressive control tactics such as cyber-attacks against foreign networks, device and network controls, domain name controls, localized internet shutdowns in case of any social unrest, surveillance, "astro-surfing" and other means of party outreach activities, Tsai reaffirms the authoritarian control of the cyberspace in China[16]. This practice, he warns, necessitates international attention and the urgent need for democracies to develop best practices and a credible rule of law for Internet governance.

The question of whether a fragmented polity effectively bring forth networked authoritarianism remains a central concern. On the one hand, we see that the political institutions that are assigned to control the various aspects of online activities are disconnected with no binding mandates, and on the other, we see the party aspiring to consolidate its regime by using the tool of powerful new networks created in cyberspace. In short, can decentralizing authorities over the internet achieve the centralizing agenda of the party? Chin (2019) attempts to study this scenario through a networked governance (NG) approach[3]. Defining network governance as the "effort of solving social problems through multi-sectional collaboration between the state, private and social actors to mobilize fragmented resources to realize favourable outcomes", Chin explains the role of social processes in China's internet governance[3]. This is a departure from the traditional FA model of understanding governance, as it attempts to look beyond bureaucratic processes and accounts for the role of private and societal actors in the decision-making process. Thus, Chin is of the view that the internet and its related governance in China is not just of the party's will, but in recent times, non-profit organisations and private actors that fit within the political structures carved out by the party are also given a place in the decision-making process. This study becomes important since it contests the entire 'Chairman rules all' leadership narrative on internet governance during the Xi Jinping era.

Based on the scholarship that has documented various online activities and censorship events in China and the parallel observation of how the party-state's organizational hierarchy changed over time, we analyze China's 'resilient authoritarianism' with respect to internet governance. First, the internet policies and practices before 2014 are discussed. This gives us a view of the fragments that existed. Then, by discussing the censorship scenario and the assertive definitions of cyber-sovereignty, a picture of Xi Jinping's centralized control is given.

'FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE' – THE INTERNET BEFORE 2014

The notion that 'social stability overrides everything' and that 'uncontrolled information is a threat to the regime' is not a new phenomenon in the Chinese party rule. Various leaders, across the regimes have ensured that the political structures within the state are instituting themselves to the changing needs of the time. However, after the advent of the internet and increasing online activities, the leaders feared that the situation went 'out of control' in the 2000s. The Office of Foreign Propaganda (OFP), which was designated for internet control, had an influence from the Party's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) but had no oversight mechanisms over the provincial level and the local level actors such as the Beijing city department or the internet police. The lack of well-defined power and jurisdiction left the local authorities to just proceed with follow-up instructions that are passed on from the OFP. In certain cases, it was observed that due to this lack of formal authority, the bureaucrats at the provincial levels resorted to penal judgements at their own discretion leading to inefficiencies in internet management. This is not to say that the internet and other online citizen activities were without restraint[7][15][18]. The Central Propaganda Department that was established in 2006 had a prominent say in defining the type of online incidents and the methods to control them. The local propaganda departments had their own means of censuring public opinions, but the CPD has the daily responsibility of identifying 'hot incidents' and deleting them before they reach the upsurge period[16]. The CPD Network Bureau that directly reported to the Politburo took care of the task by employing 'network commentators'. However, after the advent of microblogging into the Chinese internet sphere, especially via *Sina Weibo*, it was evident that the CPD couldn't detect and scrutinize every online entry. The CPD, having no direct regulatory control over the internet companies, found it tedious to micromanage blogs that were likely to be hot

incidents. In an attempt to adapt and become 'resilient' to the enormity of the online changes that were threatening the regime, the local PD rose up to the stage, coming up with their own systems of monitoring mechanisms. This structure, although seemed a way to tackle the online content, authoritarianism remained largely fragmented in its own way. At the level of the State Council, different Ministries were designated different spheres of control. For instance, online pornography was checked by the Ministry of Culture, whereas the events inciting threats to national security were under the control of the Ministry of Public Security. Thus, although the governance mechanisms and actors were aligning themselves to the proliferation of online content by undertaking suitable policy adaptations, the structures that existed before 2014 were deeply divided and unsure of their own responsibilities[8][14].

REFORMS AND CENTRALISATION UNDER XI JINPING'S RULE

The need for re-centralization and clear-cut defining of responsibilities came with the tests of times. The growing blogspheres incited public anger, that forced the party to develop policies that would 'publish truth' to its citizens. While the employment of network opinion leaders and the famous 50-cent party (signals) people helped to an extent to propagate the party agenda, institutional restructuring was accomplished only after Xi Jinping came to power. Post-2014, by establishing a Central Leadership Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization, the Internet management office was upgraded to the level of Commissions. This meant that the newly created Cyberspace Administrative Commission (CAC), which directly came under the control of the Leadership Group headed by Xi Jinping, would have exclusive administrative offices to "strengthen major procedures" under a unified leadership. The CAC acted as an 'internet czar' by having direct supervisory control over the provincial internet offices as well as the internet polices who were previously enjoying considerable autonomy. The structural reforms of 2018 that came with a "Plan to Deepen Reforms in Party and State Institutions" transferred cyberspace monitoring responsibilities of state institutions to the Party. Public-opinion guidance was also widely carried out going beyond the informal groups of *ziganwu*. Thus, the CAC and the organizational restructuring in Xi Jinping's regime is the Chairman's attempt to centralize power in his hands and to dodge bureaucratic resistance.

THE CENSORSHIP SCENARIO

The methods of internet censorship can be seen through "three generations" as categorized by Deibert and Rohozinski (2010)[5]. To these authors, the first generation of internet censorship focuses mainly on surveillance and content filtering. The second generation goes further to devise legal mechanisms of internet control that would go to the extent of legitimizing internet shutdown for the sake of national security. The third generation is a ruthless peak of state control, where excessive state surveillance and direct attacks on individuals and groups can be witnessed. While their work in 2010 held that the Chinese style of internet censorship was predominantly 'first generation', based on the recent episodes of state actions against internet activists, it can be said that the censorship scenario under Xi Jinping employs second and third-generation methods.

The recent 'Freedom on the Net' report by Freedom House corroborates this fact. Out of the major observations of the report, the rectification and the clean-up campaigns carried out by the CAC imply the first-generation tactics of the party[4]. While the formalization of censorship has been incrementally happening since 2014, we also observe informal and backchannel patterns such as the censorship factories and online patriots carrying the propaganda banner. Legalizing censorship as a second-generation tactic is witnessed by a plethora of regulations, laws, and strategies that came into effect in 2017. By imposing regulations such as the 'Internet Thread Comments Service Management Regulation', 'Regulations for Internet Content Management Administrative Law Enforcement regulation', the 'Internet Forum Service Management Regulation', Management Rules of Internet Group Information Services, etc., the Chinese government has imposed tighter controls and increased penalties on content dissemination.

The Great Firewall has been an instrument for years exercising censorship, and using VPNs amounted to a minuscule proportion of online information access. With newer regulations such as the Internet Account Public User Information Services Regulation of 2017, access via unlicensed VPNs was put to closure with criminal penalties. The report also highlights the state-led oppression after the COVID-19 pandemic. Criminal prosecution of individuals such as Wang Fang and Dr Li Wenliang for documenting their

personal experiences and opinions on the web is typical of third-generation censorship. The new judicial guidelines of the state that criminalize individuals for spreading false information and rumours online have provoked larger public outbursts against excessive censorship. Every time the public becomes wary of the state-led acts of repression, the Chairman hits back with newer regulations that decisively silence the targeted crowd. One such guideline is the recent 'Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem' that uses algorithmic filtering of online information that is likely to "subvert the CCP regime" and categorizes them as illegal and terrorist content. In addition to all these, a few of the newer policies that were envisaged under Xi's leadership and their implications are summarized in the table below.

Laws/ Policies	Implications
Cybersecurity Law 2017 Management Rules of Internet Group Services 2017 Internet Forum Service Management Regulation 2017	• Storing personal information in one's own territory • Officials can instruct to stop the transmission of certain content to protect public security
International Strategy of Cooperation in Cyberspace 2017	• Ambitions of becoming a cyber-superpower • Need for a new system of internet rules • GGE vs OEWG • SCO Code of Conduct • UN vs ICANN – Tallinn Manual
Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem 2020 (March)	• Categorisation of Online Content • the use of algorithms by online content providers to promote officially approved "mainstream values."

A study of the internet policies under Xi Jinping thus confirms the 'dictator's learning curve' as William Dobson had proposed. This implies that when authoritarian rulers take over tools of technology, they know their ways to play the system. As he sees, the regime will act in any way that would "redefine the red lines of what was permissible" (Dobson, 2012)[6]. In Xi's era, this has been more pronounced by reforming and restructuring institutions that helped the political system to move away from the shadows of a fragmented schema.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we first saw how political institutions were adapting themselves to serve the authoritarian ambitions of internet control. We then had a look into the practices of the state in controlling public opinion and the resilience with which the leadership is tackling the problem of online content management in a democratic age when online spaces outside the Chinese world are literally taking governments down. The main observation of this paper is that – the Chinese political system, despite fragmented, is not letting the fourth wave of democracy come into the way of regime consolidation. Especially after 2014, Xi Jinping's centralized control of the domestic structures, and assertive stands at the international stage, has shown that networked authoritarianism is never to go from the Chinese political space. The geopolitical implications are worrisome. First, to the civil society and the ordinary citizens, access to information and political rights towards participation are always party-determined. At the state level, we see a shift from fragmented authoritarianism towards tighter centralized control. At the diplomatic level, assertive cyber-diplomacy may point towards the development of alternative technical standards, especially in emerging technologies such as the 5G, where China has a better market hold. While all these may seem favourable towards the Party and the leader, the paper ends on a note warning about the so-called 'dictator's dilemma'. When the leader becomes more and more repressive, it becomes harder for him to actually gauge citizen sentiments. Xi's 'Chinese Dreams' and the ongoing aspirations of centralizing control may infer regime consolidation at a theoretical level. But these leadership dreams may contradictorily implode anytime by the pervasive yet silently-churning online discourses to which the emperor is turning deaf ears.

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