



Governance and Social Media

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The new element in governance is social media. Inexorably, its fertile networks of shared information shift power from authorities to citizens and amateurs, including to the “unknown” experts in the “dorm rooms and edges of society” who drive innovation.

Tweets may bust trust and undermine authority, but can social media also be a tool for building consensus through deliberation and negotiation among interests? When it comes to governance, is crowd-sourcing any better than populism at generating collective intelligence instead of disruptive “dumb mobs?” Can networks aid the self-administration of society, or does that take institutions with governing authority?

In this section, leading Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, technologists and network theorists from Google, Microsoft and the MIT Media Lab join with political scientist Francis Fukuyama and top thinkers from Asia to address these issues.



China's Labyrinth: The Rise of Monitory Democracy

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SYDNEY—James Madison famously remarked that a popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy. The present government of the People's Republic of China has set out to disprove this rule. Rejecting talk of farce and tragedy, its rulers claim their authority is rooted within a new and higher form of popular government, a “post-democratic” way of handling power which delivers goods and services, promotes social harmony and roots out “harmful behavior” using state-of-the-art information-control methods more complex and much craftier than Madison could ever have imagined.

How do these “post-democratic” methods work? The governing strategies of the Chinese authorities confirm the paradoxical rule that authoritarian regimes are much more sensitive to popular resistance than those of democracies. Information flows in China are not simply blocked, firewalled, censored. The authorities instead treat unfettered online citizen communication as an early warning device, even as a virtual steam valve for venting grievances in their favor.

Repressive tolerance of this kind resembles riding a wild tiger. Co-optation requires a vast labyrinth of surveillance that depends on a well-organized, 40,000-strong Internet police force. Skilled at snooping on Wi-Fi users in cyber cafes and hotels, it uses sophisticated “data-mining” software that tracks down keywords on search engines such as Baidu, along the way issuing warnings to web hosts to amend or delete content considered unproductive of “harmony.”

Government officials working in “situation centers” meanwhile watch for signs of brewing unrest or angry public reactions. Reports are passed to local propaganda departments, where action is taken. So-called “rumor refutation” departments, staffed by censors, pitch in. They scan posts for forbidden topics and issue knock-down rebuttals. A pivotal role is played by licensed Internet companies. Bound by constant reminders that safety valves can turn into explosive devices, they use filtering techniques to delete or amend “sensitive” content.

Within the China labyrinth, much cleverer tactics are in use, including efforts by the authorities to draw citizens into a cat's cradle of suspicion, praise, denunciation and control. Citizens are encouraged to report anti-government conversations, or recruited as hirelings known as “50-cent bloggers.” Netizens are routinely urged to become “Internet debaters.” There are experiments (as in Guangdong province) with

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virtual petition offices, online webcast forums where citizens can raise complaints and watch and hear officials handle them. Q&A sessions, organized “chats” between the authorities and citizens, are flourishing. All these methods—“authoritarian deliberation” is the phrase used by some scholars—come packaged in official assurances about the need to encourage “transparency” and to “balance” online opinions for the sake of harmoniously “guiding public opinion” (*yulung daoxiang*).

What are we to make of these tactics of repressive tolerance? Do they defy Madison’s warning that no government can be considered popular unless it allows open public communication? Looking from the top down, likening the Chinese authorities to skilled doctors of the body politic, some wax eloquent about the new surveillance tactics of “continuous tuning” (*tiao*). The simile understates the ways in which the labyrinthine system of coordinated do’s and don’ts is backed by pre-digital methods: fear served with cups of tea in the company of censors; sackings and sideways promotions; early-morning swoops by plain-clothed police known as “interceptors”; illegal detentions; violent beatings by unidentified thugs.

Proponents of the Party’s Web-monitoring tactics are silent about such violence. They also overstate the efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy of the China labyrinth. They ignore the banana skins—and the popular resentments sparked by a regulatory system that treats more than a few subjects as ticklish, or taboo. The Party authorities are dead opposed to monitory democracy (*jiandushi minzhu*), in the richest sense of free and fair general elections combined with ongoing public monitoring of its power by independent watchdogs. Public criticism of the leading role of the Party and its leading figures is not permitted. The subject of Taiwan-style free and fair elections is taboo. So also is fair-minded analysis of “sensitive” regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, or “sensitive” topics, such as religion and the past crimes committed by the Party. Behind closed doors, it is said they stir up trouble and spread infections through the body politic.

Such restrictions breed public resentment and resistance. In the past, Chinese people were often compared (unflatteringly) to a “dish of sand.” Yet with the overall size of Internet traffic doubling every 5.32 years, digital media usage now routinely nurtures the spirit of monitory democracy. The range and depth of resistance to unaccountable power are often astonishing. The regime comes wrapped in surveillance, but counter-publics flourish. Helped by sophisticated proxies and other methods of avoiding censorship, salacious tales of official malfeasance circulate fast, and in huge numbers, fueled by online jokes, songs, satire, mockery, code words and mascots, such as the “grass-mud horse.” Digital media users commonly re-tweet their posts (a practice nicknamed “knitting,” the word for which sounds like

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"weibo"). Messages easily morph into conversations, illustrated with pictures. If the authorities try to block posts then users typically have time and technology on their side. Instantly forwarded posts tend to keep ahead of the censors, whose efforts at removing online material are countered by re-tweeted screenshots.

The aggregate effect is that conversations readily go viral, as happened (to take a well-known recent example) when a citizen nicknamed "Brother Banner," a software engineer in Wuxi, was catapulted into online celebrity status overnight after holding a banner that read "Not Serving the People" outside the gate of a local labor relations office. In desperation, he had been protesting its failure to intervene in his pay dispute with his former employer. The banner challenged the Party's slogan, "Serving the People." Department officials were deeply embarrassed by a one-person protest that won national prominence through the Internet and, eventually, coverage in official media.

The great significance of citizens' initiatives of this kind is the way they put their finger on hypocrisy. They call on the authorities to listen, to live up to their promises of bringing "harmony" and material well-being to people's lives. The upshot is the authorities now find themselves trapped in a constant tug-of-war between their will to control, negotiated change, public resistance and unresolved confusion. They may pride themselves on building a regime which seems calculating, flexible, dynamic—constantly willing to change its ways in order to remain the dominant guiding power. Yet they also know well the new Chinese proverb: Ruling used to be like hammering a nail into wood, now it is much more like balancing on a slippery egg. Whether the authorities can sustain their present balancing act, so proving James Madison wrong, seems doubtful. Within the China labyrinth the spirit of monitory democracy is alive and well. Whether and how it will prevail against the crafty forces of surveillance is among the great global political questions of our time.

