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ARTICLE

China and the Fifth Estate: Net Delusion or Democratic Potential?*

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Abstract

Arguably, liberal democratic societies are seeing the emergence of a 'Fifth Estate' that is being enabled by the Internet. This new organizational form is comparable to, but potentially more powerful than, the Fourth Estate, which developed as a significant force in an earlier period with an independent press and other mass media. While the significance of the press and the Internet to democratic governance is questioned in all societies, there is particular skepticism of their relevance outside the most liberal democratic regimes, which have a relatively free press and more pluralistic political systems, such as

* This article extends and updates an earlier working paper presented at 'New Media, Internet Communication, and Communities in China', a Preconference for the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Phoenix, Arizona, 23 May 2012 (Huan et al., 2013).

** The authors are listed alphabetically to denote their comparable contributions. The original concept for the work came from the lead author. Sun Huan conducted the original field research and early drafts of the case studies. Weiwei Shen provided fresh and independent reviews of the case material and contributed to the drafting of the paper.

in North America and West Europe. Nevertheless, there have been vivid examples of where networked individuals have appeared to assert greater communicative power in the politics of governance, the media and everyday life, even in non-liberal democratic regimes, such as Hong Kong, and in some cases, China. This potential points to the need for more systematic empirical research in a wider variety of economic and political settings worldwide, particularly in states in which the Internet might offer a potential for more democratic governance and greater accountability of government controlled media. This paper examines cases in which networked individuals in China used the Internet to hold governmental and press institutions more accountable. The cases provide support for the relevance of the Fifth Estate concept in China, and also illuminates the process - showing how the Internet can be used to empower networked individuals in more autocratic regimes.

Keywords

fifth estate, 5th estate, China, empowerment, communication, power, democracy

Topic

Internet and politics

China y el quinto poder: ¿ilusión de la red o potencial democrático?

Resumen

Podría decirse que las sociedades democráticas están asistiendo a la emergencia de un «quinto poder», que es posible gracias a internet. Esta nueva forma de organización es comparable al cuarto poder -pero potencialmente es más poderosa-, que se desarrolló como una fuerza significativa en una época anterior gracias a una prensa independiente y otros medios de comunicación de masa. Aunque la importancia de la prensa y de internet para la gobernanza democrática es cuestionada en todas las sociedades, existe un particular escepticismo en cuanto a su importancia entre regímenes democráticos más liberales, en los que la prensa es relativamente libre y los sistemas políticos son más plurales, por ejemplo Norteamérica y Europa occidental. Sin embargo, ha habido destacables ejemplos de lugares donde individuos conectados en red han tenido un gran poder comunicativo sobre las políticas de gobierno, los medios de comunicación y la vida cotidiana, incluso en regímenes democráticos no liberales, como es Hong Kong y, en ciertos casos, China. Este potencial señala la necesidad de una investigación empírica más sistemática en una variedad más amplia de escenarios económicos y políticos del mundo, especialmente en estados donde internet ofrezca posibilidades para una gobernanza más democrática y para una mayor responsabilidad y transparencia de los medios de comunicación controlados por los gobiernos. Este trabajo estudia casos en que individuos conectados en red en China utilizaron internet para que instituciones gubernamentales y de prensa tuvieran más responsabilidad a la hora de rendir cuentas. Estos casos reafirman la importancia del concepto de quinto poder en China, además de alumbrar el proceso, mostrando cómo internet se puede utilizar para capacitar a los individuos conectados en red en regímenes más autocráticos.

Palabras clave

quinto poder, 5º poder, China, empoderamiento, comunicación, poder, democracia

Tema

internet y política

Introduction

In 2015, China's Premier, Li Keqiang, spoke at a news conference following the National People's Congress, to say that the government would address public concerns over pollution. This was a response attributed in part to a popular documentary, entitled "Under the Dome". The film was produced by a state television producer, but popularized rapidly over social media. It pulled together increasing evidence that contradicted the government's own claims regarding safe levels of pollution in the major cities. The Internet and social media complemented the documentary in this case by enabling it to spread widely and very rapidly -while the conference was in progress, and before it was banned from Websites. Prior to this moment, the Internet also was used to providing evidence of pollution levels that was relatively independent of governmental control. Large numbers of residents in major cities used mobile phone environmental apps as sensors to register levels of pollution.¹ Readings from these apps could then be aggregated to provide real-time reports on pollution levels based on this collective intelligence, which often contradicted more positive reports by governmental authorities. This led to more accountable agencies being established to monitor pollution levels in a more transparent and comparative manner, such as by ranking cities.²

The Question

Are such instances evidence of the potential for the Internet to enable more democratic forms of accountability, or an illusion of democracy? The potential of the Internet as a tool for democratic empowerment has been widely debated and researched, particularly in the aftermath of the series of protests and demonstrations across the Middle East that has been called the Arab Spring. Critics of the Internet supporting this democratic potential have argued that this technology can be used more effectively by autocratic regimes to reinforce their power, such as through even more powerful tools for state surveillance than is possible by networked citizens, or "netizens" (e.g., Morozov, 2011). This is in line with the long-term view that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are sufficiently malleable that their adoption and implementation will tend to reinforce

existing structures of power and influence rather than open up the potential for shifting power to new actors (Danziger *et al.*, 1982).

However, there is evidence in a growing number of cases where networked individuals have been able to use the Internet to challenge powerful institutions, such as by having greater access to information and also the ability to expose information in ways that can hold the powerful more accountable, such as in the case of Wikileaks. This potential has led to the concept of a new "Fifth Estate" role that the Internet can enable (Dutton, 1999, 2010, 2013, 2015).

The Idea of a Fifth Estate

This perspective on the Internet's political implications for the politics of governance, the media and everyday life is that networked individuals are able to use the Internet and related information and communication technologies to perform a "Fifth Estate" function that is analogous to the role of the press in an earlier era. A distinctive aspect of this perspective is that it is not anchored in conceptions of institutional change. That is, unlike conceptions of cyber- or e-democracy, the Fifth Estate does not depend on governmental institutions using the Internet to transform themselves into more democratic institutions, such as by using more direct forms of democratic control, like referendums or electronic voting and polling. Instead, networked individuals can create and obtain information resources through the Internet, that are outside of and more independent of existing institutions, thereby creating a more pluralistic basis of accountability, literally enabling them to speak the truth to power.

However, most studies of the Internet and democracy are anchored in liberal democratic political systems with a relatively free press, independent judiciaries and some separation of powers. The same is true for studies of the Fifth Estate. While a growing number of studies have focused on the role of the Internet in the politics of the media in China, such as focusing on such issues as the impact of blogging on the press, they have not focused on holding other institutions, such as the government, more accountable (Zheng, 2007; Yang, 2009; Shirk, 2011;

1. See: <<https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7206-Can-air-pollution-app-for-smartphone-users-kickstart-new-era-of-transparency-in-China>> [Accessed: 20 May 2015].
2. See: <<http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/environment/can-pollution-tracking-app-kickstart-transparency>> [Accessed: 20 May 2015].

Hassid, 2012). Few studies in China have focused on more conventional initiatives around democratic reform, given they are so rare, and none have viewed activities from the perspective of the Fifth Estate. In fact, to many scholars of politics in China, the lack of a liberal democratic tradition and institutions in China is likely to negate the potential for the emergence of a Fifth Estate role of the Internet.

Approach of this Study

This article seeks to challenge the view that a Fifth Estate could not emerge in China, seen as a non-liberal democratic state that has taken an aggressive role in controlling the media and Internet use. Case studies in China are used to elaborate this potential, such as the role of searching and networking by networked individuals, for which blogging is one of many tools, and also to advance understanding of its dynamics in a nation where the emergence of a Fifth Estate would not have been anticipated, given strict state controls of the media. This study suggests that the concept of the Fifth Estate is indeed relevant to China, and also illuminates the processes that enabled networked individuals to use the Internet in ways that enhanced their communicative power.

China is becoming a key focus of Internet studies because of governmental efforts to control Internet content, but also because it has become the nation with the largest number of users, exceeding 642 million by 2015.³ Three cases in China were chosen because each was widely reputed to have been reshaped by the public's use of the Internet. These cases not only support the utility of the concept of a Fifth Estate in the context of China, but also further an understanding of the dynamics that enable the Fifth Estate to empower networked individuals. In all three cases, Internet users became involved when traditional mechanisms of consultation, state media, and news reporting did not meet the expectations of a set of networked individuals. Networked individuals played a Fifth Estate role in each case by holding the press or governmental institutions more accountable, primarily by sourcing their own information and reframing issues in ways that engaged more actors. They were able to change the scope of conflict in ways that reflected a key aspect of E. E. Schattschneider's (1960) conception of the dynamics of political conflict - an extreme case of his conception of the "semi-sovereign people".

The following section briefly sketches the idea of a Fifth Estate and the patterns of findings that led to its formulation. This is followed by an overview of the methodological approach of this study before describing the three case studies. The final sections reflect back on these case studies to elaborate the application of the Fifth Estate in the context of China, and its relationship to how Schattschneider's notions can be brought into the digital age in a nondemocratic context.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize beyond these cases to the larger context of China, particularly given that they are atypical or extreme cases. Nevertheless, as critical cases, they provide an empirical approach to developing a better understanding of the Fifth Estate and how networked individuals can indeed be empowered even in states without a relatively independent press or open Internet. These cases and our interpretations can advance theory as they are critically assessed and elaborated by further cases and related empirical research in China and other networked nations.

The Fifth Estate Perspective

There are competing conceptions of the role the Internet can play in (dis)empowering citizens, ranging from the Internet being irrelevant clicktivism (Bennett *et al.*, 1999), inherently democratic or anti-democratic (de Sola Pool 1983), or socially shaped to reinforce existing structures of control (Danziger *et al.*, 1982; Morozov, 2011). A variation of this reinforcement position is a new perspective on the politics of the Internet, which has been conceptualized as enabling a Fifth Estate.

From this Fifth Estate perspective, the communicative power of networked individuals is being reinforced by the ways they can use the Internet to source information and form networks in ways that can hold other actors more accountable, in ways that are comparable in significance to the rise of the Fourth Estate in an earlier era. They are not transforming existing democratic institutions, such as public consultation, but adding a new and more independent source for creating, networking, and providing information resources that can challenge existing institutions.

Early research on the power shifts associated with the adoption and use of computing in organizations, found

3. See World Internet Stats at: <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>> [Accessed: 21 May 2015].

computers were used in ways that tended to follow and reinforce existing structures of power and influence (Danziger *et al.*, 1982). This perspective remains prominent, such as in the influential work of Evgeny Morozov (2011), and Jan Van Dijk (2012). Morozov, for example, argued that the political context of Internet use drives its implications. From his perspective, in many nations the Internet will be controlled by autocrats in ways that will follow and reinforce their influence, rather than being used as a tool for democratic empowerment - which he characterized as a "net delusion" (Morozov, 2011). While his work was published before the Arab uprisings, it remains an influential perspective, and has been lent some support by the longer-term reversals of the democratic uprisings supported by networked individuals. The ability of networked individuals to sustain activity overtime is a serious issue limiting the capacity of a Fifth Estate (Dutton and Lin, 2001).

However, one major problem with this reinforcement perspective is that the Internet is a huge, complex, and global technical system that is increasingly impossible for any single actor to control (Dutton *et al.*, 2012). This makes reinforcement politics more problematic. A more inductive perspective on the role of the Internet has focused on observing actual patterns of use and impact to determine what kinds of power shifts emerge in practice. This inductive approach led to early conceptions of reinforcement politics in organizations, such as local governments (Danziger *et al.*, 1982). However, the development and use of the Internet over the ensuing decades raise questions over the degree that autocrats, organizations or nations can continue to exercise control over the development and impact of globally networked ICTs like the Internet and related social media.

Like the social shaping perspective on ICTs, the concept of a Fifth Estate is not technologically deterministic. It focuses on the technical, social and political contexts of use, but it also does not presume that existing structures of power and influence are simply reinforced, given the global ecology of actors that are shaping the Internet and its implications in a variety of intended and unanticipated ways. From an empirical, inductive perspective, research has documented a developing pattern of findings that support the role of the Internet in empowering networked individuals in ways that they can counter existing institutions, such as governments and the press (Dutton 2007, 2009, 2010; Newman *et al.*, 2012).

In particular, users of the Internet have increasingly brought the Internet into their work and everyday life in more central

ways that provide them with more independence from any single institution, such as a local government or the media. They go to the Internet as a first port of call for information, rather than going to a particular place- to a global space of flows rather than a local space of places (Castells, 2004, pp. 11-12). Moreover, they do not go to specific sites, but most often find content through search engines or social networks, which refer them to information of most relevance to their interests. While new algorithms and search histories might limit the openness of search, this management of search is one element of a strategy for limiting or enlarging the role of the Internet in supporting networked individuals.

In addition, networked individuals have a learned level of trust in the information they source, which is comparable to, if not greater than what they learn from the press or broadcasting (Blank and Dutton, 2011). In China, for example, reliance on the Internet for information is in many respects more prominent than in the US and other liberal democracies in which people can have greater trust in the mass media (Dutton *et al.*, 2013).

The concept of the Fifth Estate envisions the Internet as a platform through which networked individuals can perform a useful democratic role in holding institutions such as the media and government more accountable. Networked individuals can source their own information, independent of any single institution, using the capabilities provided by search and social media. Also, users can create their own content in many forms, from monitoring pollution levels with an environmental app to posting photos on blogs, to commenting on websites, providing even greater independence from other institutions and offering a mechanism whereby public opinion can be directly expressed.

This individually sourced or distributed content can bypass or be amplified by the traditional mass media of the Fourth Estate, such as in the case of 'Under the Dome', but in doing so it can fulfil many of the same functions of holding the activities of government, business and other institutions up to the light of a networked public. In such ways, the Fifth Estate is distinct from the mainstream of media studies that focus on the relationships between mass media and blogging, such as in setting agendas (Hassid, 2012). From a Fifth Estate perspective, the Internet is not viewed simply as a new medium, but as a platform that can be used by media institutions but also by networked individuals to challenge the media and play a potentially important political role, yet

without the institutional foundations of the Fourth Estate. It is composed of the distributed activities of one or many individuals acting on their own or collaboratively but in a more decentralized network. This means that it is not equivalent to a social movement. Revolving sets of networked individuals can hold the leadership of social movements accountable like other institutional authorities in ways enabled by the Internet (Dutton, 2009; Newman *et al.*, 2011).

The Dynamics of the Fifth Estate: An Old Perspective on a New Phenomenon

This Fifth Estate perspective guided our approach to the case studies noted above. Its dynamics will be developed further in this article in light of the cases. However, in the course of our early efforts to understand the dynamics of the Fifth Estate in the context of our cases, we were reminded of E. E. Schattschneider's (1960) perspective on the dynamics of political conflicts. His ideas are based on traditional political strategies in liberal democratic politics - not on the politics of the Internet in authoritarian regimes. Therefore, his notions around the 'semi-sovereign people' are most often reflected in mass media research around the role of agenda-setting and issue-framing (McLeod and Detenber, 1999). And work on agenda setting has proven to be of value in the context of China, with its active blogging communities (Shirk 2011; Hassid 2012). However, Schattschneider's original conception linked agenda setting and framing, as conceptualized in contemporary research, more directly to the outcome of political conflict. It therefore provided a useful language for discussing the role of the Fifth Estate, as will be described in the case studies.

Essentially, Schattschneider (1960, p. 1) argued that the central aspect of politics in a liberal democratic society is that conflict can spread or exhibit 'contagiousness'. The importance of this is captured by his analogy between politics and spectator sports, except - he points out - in the game of politics, the spectators can join in the game at any time and on any side. And the outcome of the game or political conflict is shaped by the extent to which the spectators become involved and on what side they choose to join in. This dynamic makes the most important strategy of politics is for contestants to control the scope of a conflict. This is one reason why traditional political institutions place much effort in controlling communication. They do not want to accidentally create issues that bring more people into a conflict as it could have unpredictable consequences on the outcome.

For example, if someone is winning a contest, they would want to retain the present scope of conflict, and keep all the spectators in the stands. In contrast, it is in the interest of those losing a conflict to broaden the scope, since they have nothing more to lose and can open up the possibility of more spectators joining their side in the conflict and thereby create the potential for a more positive outcome. The scope of the conflict can be changed by socializing or drawing the attention of more people to the conflict (agenda-setting), or changing the issue (re-framing), which can lead some spectators to join a particular side or for some contestants to switch sides. This simple analogy provides a powerful perspective on why the Internet can play a pivotal role in the political process. But for networked individuals to use the Internet to shape the scope of conflict, they need alternative channels of communication, such as a blog, that are not controlled by those winning the game. It also requires the ability to source credible information that is independent of the media and other institutions that are shaping the agenda. As you follow the cases described below, you can see the ways in which networked individuals played this role in reconfiguring the scope of conflict.

Mini-Cases of an Emerging Fifth Estate Role

Given countervailing expectations on the role of the Internet, along with a prevailing theme of state control being likely to marginalize the significance of the Internet in politics, we were captivated by stories of the Internet being used effectively within states, such as China, which is among the nations which have the highest levels of regulation of online expression (Deibert *et al.*, 2010). For example, in July of 2011, when 40 people were killed in a high-speed train collision in Wenzhou, in the Zhejiang province of China, governmental efforts to constrain media coverage of this accident soon led to critical coverage online and in the press (Aredy and Yang, 2011). The Internet is not expected to enable the formation of an independent base of political and social accountability, in states that do not have an independent press (Bennett, 2010) but also control Internet use, such as through Internet content filtering and the control of users, e.g., through the arrest of bloggers. Nevertheless, events such as those that followed the Wenzhou speed train incident suggest that scholars cannot dismiss the Internet and the media's role in states like China, which merit further exploration. Moreover, key studies of the Internet in China reinforce the potential

for networked individuals to be empowered in this context (Yang, 2009; Shirk, 2011).

The Context: Content Regulation in China

China has become a primary example of a state with a controlled press, where a number of government organizations have combined to regulate media content, despite demands for better news coverage (Shirk, 2010). At the highest level, the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) is responsible for oversight of the media. In practice, the CPD works in collaboration with other government bodies, such as the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). Together, they produce guidelines to instruct the work of media outlets across the country. For example, news reporting about politically sensitive events is strictly forbidden (Bennett, 2010). However, these guidelines are not sufficiently public or explicit to eliminate ambiguity over what for example, might be viewed as politically sensitive. Experienced media practitioners are expected to know where to draw the line, but such self-regulation often leads news organizations to err on the side of over-regulation and censure of questionable news reporting (Stern and O'Brien, 2011).

These regulatory guidelines have been applied to the news services on the Web, social media, mobile phones, and related ICTs. However, more government organizations are involved in monitoring and censorship of the online world (Zhao, 2009). Beyond CPD, GAPP, and SARFT, these include: the State Council Information Office (SCIO), which has the power of licensing agencies in putting original news online, and also oversees websites that feed from these approved news agencies; the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), which is responsible for the supervision of the telecommunication infrastructure such as international gateway systems and text message jamming (Zhao, 2009); the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the State Secrecy Bureau and China's Judiciary, which can monitor websites, and track and investigate users that threaten online security (Anon, 2009); and the Ministry of Culture (MC), which plays a key role in making policies and enforcing laws and regulations to direct the mainstream culture in line with the priorities of the CPD. These organizations are integrated in ways that are designed to implement the guidance provided by the Communist Party. However, given the number of agencies involved, and the existence of still other regulatory regimes, such as those regulating mobile phone services,

many of which might have competing views on the same issues, there remains a level of uncertainty over content regulation, particularly at the local level. Nevertheless, as described here, China has a strong regulatory regime aimed towards controlling the press and mass media, including the Internet and related social media, making exceptions to state control notable.

Selection of Mini-Cases

Three case studies were selected because of their notoriety as examples in which the Internet seemed to play a significant role in government and politics. The cases included an effort to block the Xiamen Paraxylene (PX) petrochemical project; challenges to the failures in reporting of a gas explosion in Nanjing; and uncovering an expense claims scandal by judicial officials. They are not purported to be a representative sample or in-depth participant observer case studies. To the contrary, they are exceptional or critical cases, in three different areas of policy, and examined in a focused way to determine whether there was sufficient evidence of a Fifth Estate role. Each seemed significant as well by virtue of involving the allocation of resources with redistributive consequences. Buildings were not built, individuals were fired, public officials were disciplined. Tangible resources were at stake in non-trivial ways.

Sources of Evidence and Empirical Methods of Observation

Because the cases we studied appeared to counter conventional expectations, our research initially sought to critically question whether these accounts were credible or simply new urban myths. In each case we found them substantiated by multiple sources of evidence, ranging from multiple journalistic accounts to interviews with participants and observers, as described and referenced below. As importantly, we sought to understand how the Internet was able to effect change, despite state oversight and control of online expression in China.

The cases were explored in stages. We first systematically surveyed press and blog coverage at several levels. We began with searches for articles related to each of the three cases in the Chinese database of newspapers archived by the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). This coverage enabled us to identify the course of events for each case as well as points of contention. Using and extrapolating from the key words within these reports, we then searched

the major Chinese blog, BBS, and microblog platforms, such as SinaWeibo, Sina Blog, Sohu Blog, Net Ease and Tianya BBS, for additional material related to each case. We found the posts often referring to local online forums or other pieces of information about these cases such as video posts on Youku, so they were included in our dataset and analysis.⁴

This background information provided the basic narrative of each case. The lead Chinese author then e-mailed selected participants, such as bloggers and reporters involved in each of the events in order to request additional details, validate reports, and generate links to other participants. This approach led to direct communication with key participants, interviewed primarily over the Internet or by phone. Key sources of major factual claims and observations relevant to each case are cited in the text and associated notes, with the permission of those interviewed. We have only included the names of reporters and bloggers who have given their permission, and who are well known by their role in the cases. Otherwise, we do not report the actual names of bloggers or individuals interviewed.

The next sections describe each mini-case. We call them “mini-cases” since we were not able to conduct the level of detailed participant-observation that we would have in a full case study, limited by the sensitivity of the cases and topics. After describing the cases, we offer a number of general observations on some of their cross-cutting themes.

Cases of a Fifth Estate in China

Blocking an Environmentally Hazardous Plant: the Xiamen PX Project

In 2007, the residents of Xiamen, a port city in Fujian Province in south-eastern China, halted the proposed construction of a local chemical plant, intended for production of paraxylene (PX), a petrochemical used in manufacturing polyester and other fabrics. The construction site was seven kilometres from the city centre and less than 1.5 kilometres from a residential area with two universities and thousands of residents (Xie, 2007). Similar projects had been built further

from city centres, often by seventy or more kilometres. Residents opposed the PX project as a threat to their seaside environment, and used the Internet in multiple ways to express their opposition, including online activism - clicktivism, text message campaigns, and the orchestration of peaceful demonstrations.

The project had obtained approvals from the central government and the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Moreover, the National Development and Reform Commission identified it as one of seven crucial PX projects of the nation's Eleventh Five-year Plan. Therefore, despite concerns expressed by local residents, one of the most important industrial projects in Xiamen's history was launched on 17 November 2006. An official report of the company said that this project was symbolic of Xiamen rising to the status of a world-class petrochemical giant.⁵

After the project's approval was announced, environmental experts, including noted academics, repeated concerns over its impact and called for the project to be stopped. During two subsequent congresses, the National People's Congress (NPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2007, 105 members jointly signed the 'Proposal of Moving the Xiamen Haicang PX Project'. One of them, Zhao Yufen, a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and a professor of Xiamen University, stated in a published interview that: “PX is a dangerous, highly carcinogenic chemical that can cause a high rate of fetal deformities” (Qu, 2007).

Also, local media in Xiamen featured regular reports on the project, focusing on the environmental issues. These were augmented by bloggers. One famous online activist, Zhong Xiaoyong, in his persona as the blogger Lian Yue, posted a series of blogs on this project- with titles such as “Environmental protection officials who can not protect the environment”, and “What are the people of Xiamen supposed to do!”. He suggested simple actions that individual citizens could take in order to oppose the proposed siting of the plant, sent many messages about the health risks,

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4. Most of the sources were surveyed during the period from August to December 2010, but followed up after the initial studies and a repeated series of revisions of each case, which added materials to the cases. The complete collection of the anonymized sources can be made available upon request.
 5. Reporting to the Secretary General, available at: <http://www.xm.gov.cn/xmyw/200701/t20070114_151080.htm> [Accessed: 22 December, 2010].

and reassured the public that they would be safe from retribution. He blogged: "Don't be afraid" and that there is 'no need to commit any acts of bravery" (Kennedy, 2010).

On 15 March 2007, a blog called "Haicang, My Home" was set up by Xiamen residents, on which they posted dramatic pleas, such as "The cries of residents of Xiamen City, Fujian province – please save our rights to live!". The blog stated:

[...] every time we call the police or the environmental protection hotline, the answer we are given is that someone will be coming right away to see if the plant is operating properly or not. [...] Yet the residents have not received any data on the pollution, nor monitoring of the air quality index, since the district was established three years ago. Xiamen has air quality forecasts done every day, yet the only area overlooked is Haicang District. We just want fresh air! Smells that are strong enough to wake people up in the middle of the night do no harm to the body? Even when the Fujian provincial environmental protection agency teamed up with the Xiamen city government environmental protection agency in September to carry out a three-day monitoring of air quality in Haicang, the result was that hydrogen sulphide levels and the strength of stench exceeded national standards (report available at the city and district environmental protection agencies).⁶

On 28 May 2007, Wang Yongjun, who had been a journalist for the Xiamen Bureau of the Xinhua News Agency, posted an article online to persuade residents to send out an anti-pollution SMS (Short Message Service) at Oeeee.com,⁷ using a ID of Xiamen Wave.⁸ The pronunciation of this ID in the Fujian native dialect is exactly the same as for a Xiamen resident, making it readily memorable. When it was published in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, the article received attention from other national media and national portal sites, which immediately reported the article on their front pages. More than 10,000 comments were posted in response to Xiamen Wave's article, and it registered a click rate of nearly 57,000, as thousands of Xiamen residents were circulating the same SMS message. The text message read:

[T]he Xianglu Group has invested in a PX project in Haicang District. Should this highly toxic chemical product be manufactured, it would be like dropping an atomic bomb on Xiamen Island; it would mean that, in the future, the people of Xiamen would live in the shadow of leukemia and deformed children. We want to live...when you see this SMS please sent it to all of your friends in Xiamen! (Lan and Zhang, 2007)

On 28 May 2007, in response to the online activity, the Chief of the Environment Protection Bureau of Xiamen responded to questions on the potential environmental problems in the *Xiamen Daily*. The next day, the general manager of the Xiamen PX Project, Lin Yingzong, published an article in the *Xiamen Evening Newspaper*, explaining the safety measures being taken by the PX project. During a brief news conference on 30 May, Xiamen's first Deputy Mayor, Ding Guoyan, announced that the construction of the PX project would be postponed and that the Xiamen government would begin a process of public consultation, including the use of the mayor's hot line, email, text messaging, telephone, fax, and post in order to obtain the views of citizens.

Nevertheless, many residents were dissatisfied with the Xiamen government's response, arguing that officials were more concerned with public relations than a change in policy. Many netizens received messages issued from a popular local bulletin board system (BBS), Xiaoyu Community online, which called for a 'walk' (*San Bu*) to the City Hall. However, on 30 May, access to the Xiaoyu BBS was blocked with a notification which read: "[T]he community is temporarily closed for a program upgrade". According to one user of the Xiaoyu Community BBS, they had all received an email from the BBS administrator that instructed them not to post anything related to the PX project.⁹

Nevertheless, and possibly caused if not inspired by this effort to block communication, information about the walk continued to be widely distributed and the demonstration proceeded as planned. On 1 June 2007, many citizens demonstrated in the city centre under the supervision

6. "The cries of residents of Xiamen city, Fujian province – please save our rights to live!" <<http://blog.sina.com.cn/haicangpx>> [Accessed: 24 December, 2010], English translation is available at: <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/04/07/china-inner-city-toxics-plant-protested/>> [Accessed: 24 December, 2010]
7. The article was entitled "Anti-pollution! Xiamen million residents, let's send out the same SMS". The original one has been deleted online, and a part of this article is available at: <<http://news.163.com/07/1220/15/405QUSCNO001124J.html>> [Accessed: 24 December, 2010]
8. Oeeee.com (Aoyi Wang), representing "omniscience-eye", is operated by Nanfang Daily Media Group, one of the most influencing media corporation in China. Beside Oeeee.com, the Group also runs Nanfang Daily, Southern Metropolitan Daily and Southern Weekend.
9. Ibid.

of police. A few netizens posted live reports of the demonstration on their blogs, using their mobile phones and software to send text messages onto the Internet. Traditional media, by contrast, were virtually silent about the demonstration.

Wen Yunchao, known as Beifeng in his blog, and who was participating in the protest, posted several live reports. Conversations regarding the protest between Beifeng and other netizens were extensive, running to over 9,000 Chinese characters. Most of the blog posts were short, but they were vivid and conveyed detailed descriptions of unfolding events: reporting where people were heading, what banners participants were holding, what slogans they were shouting, the estimated number of police and participants, and the rumours of the government's response. They were circulating among participants during the protest. For example, Wen Yunchao wrote: "In front of city hall". - "I guess there are over ten thousand people"- 'No route was planned before, so it was a little bit chaotic'.¹⁰ And he argued that: "The development of the new media technology has made it impossible to block all the information".¹¹

On the 1 and 3 June 2007, the Xiamen government broadcasted mass text messages to all citizens, announcing that the PX project had been postponed and that the government would soon provide more information channels in order to hear the views of residents, such as via cell phones and the Internet. Then, on 7 June, the Xiamen government said that whether or not to continue construction of the PX project would be determined through another environmental assessment.

Six months later, on 5 December 2007, the environmental assessment report concluded that the Haicang District was too small to have both a petrochemical plant, particularly when sited near a residential area. Three days later, the Xiamen government opened a voting platform on its website - but it was taken down after only one day. When the poll was closed on the following day, 55,376 of the 58,454 votes cast were against the project. However, the managers of the

website dismissed the overwhelmingly negative vote, saying they had neglected to take account of the fact that multiple votes might come from the same IP address. It did not accept the vote and abandoned the idea of polling residents.

On 13 and 14 December, the Xiamen government held two separate meetings inviting representatives of the Xiamen residents to discuss the PX project. Over 80 percent of the participants voted against the PX project during the meetings. Finally, on 16 December 2007, the PX project was suspended by the authorities. Rather than being stopped, it was announced that the project would be moved to Zhangzhou, a neighbouring city to Xiamen in Fujian.

Holding News Media to Account: the Nanjing Gas Explosion

On 28 July 2010, in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province, a pipe burst that was carrying flammable gas. The leak exploded at 10.15 am when the leaking gas was ignited by a kitchen flame at a nearby restaurant (Yang and Shanguan, 2010). The explosion was said to be the largest recorded since 1949, and could be felt 10 kilometres away (Wang and Luan, 2010). The next day, after investigation of the incident, the police downplayed it and blamed the explosion on a construction company that failed to meet necessary building safety standards.¹² According to an official of the State Administration for Work Safety, "due to illegal sub-contracting and lack of supervision, the construction did not meet safety standards" (Toloken and Sun, 2010).

Reports on the incident by several local newspapers contained a number of inconsistencies that were challenged by netizens (Ju, Hu and Wang, 2011). One blogger, 'Nanjing Lao Cui', took photos of the front pages of six local newspapers on 29 July and posted them on his blog (Nanjing Lao Cui, 2010). As his blog argued, the press tended to bury news coverage of the event. His blog showed that only one paper, *Modern Express*, a newspaper run by a national news agency, reported the explosion, but placed it on the

10. Full text of live report is on Wen Yunchao's blog, available at: <<http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/wenyc1230/archives/69959.aspx>> [Accessed: 25 December, 2010].

11. Wen Yunchao, word document with title of "Xiamen from Beginning to End" attached to email entitled "re: Xiamen PX Project" to Sun Huan, 11 November, 2010. Cited with permission.

12. Multiple companies were involved in the construction, and in this case, a qualified contractor signed a subcontract with a company, which caused the explosion, and was judged as unqualified.

back cover. No other major newspaper in the city had the explosion in a featured position, such as on their front or back page. *Nanjing MorningNews*, which is attached to *Xinhua Daily* and owned by the provincial party committee, did not refer to the explosion at all in its first six pages. *Nanjing Daily*, *Yangtze Evening News* and *Jinling Evening News* all led with news of a plane crash in Pakistan, and photos of the plane crash occupied over half of the *Nanjing Daily's* front page.

However, online networks developed the story of the explosion, with pictures of the explosion diffusing rapidly online. Unlike the delayed and inconsistent newspaper reports, netizens were quick to cover the incident by using the Internet, blogs, and other ICTs, with much coverage on micro-blogs available within an hour of the explosion. Then, a report of the explosion, which included video and pictures, was posted on a BBS, which was soon cross-posted on many other major BBSs in China, such as one entitled, "Big Blast in the North of Nanjing".¹³

There was no official report about the number of people who were injured by the explosion. However, the hospitals in Nanjing announced that they had run out of blood supplies in the aftermath of the explosion and were in urgent need of donors. A tweet that encouraged Nanjing residents to donate blood was cross-posted over 5000 times (He, 2010).

Perhaps the most incredible instance was when bloggers shared a video clip within which a government official was seen to have interrupted the live reporting of the explosion on the Jiangsu City Channel.¹⁴ He was reported to have said: "Who gave you permission to broadcast live?" This question was circulated widely on the Internet (Tan 2010, p. A08). This is one of the only concrete statements coming from a government official, but it spoke volumes. Most of the traditional broadcast media kept silent the next day, but the explosion continued to be discussed on the following day and long after on many local BBSs and microblogs (He, 2010).

In the aftermath of the explosion, a news article, entitled 'Governmental Journalism in Crisis', was published in the *People's Daily* by Ye Hao (2010), the minister of the public relations department of Nanjing. Essentially, he acknowledged that every citizen can be a journalist in the era of the Internet, and argued that blocking media coverage is wrong and ineffective in the digital age. Ye Hao specifically noted that: "After a crisis, we used to fear the media would bring chaos, leading to public panic and that it would create a negative image of the government, but in fact it is exactly the opposite". Taking the Nanjing explosion as an example, he said that well before the government had time to send a press release, false and misleading rumours had already been spread widely online. His argument was that if the government were to publish information as soon as possible, even in real-time, there would be a greater likelihood of diminishing unfounded rumours and misinformation. Every incident, according to Ye Hao, has been teaching the government to be more sophisticated in handling information, and that it should move toward more open disclosure of information as its standard approach (Ye, 2010).

Holding Public Officials Accountable: Challenging a Publicly Funded Visit

On 3 June 2009, bloggers posted more than ten internal government documents regarding a public-funded overseas visit by six officials from the Guangzhou Maritime Court (Ye 2009, p. 7). The documents included: a request to the foreign affairs office of Guangzhou People's government; a report of the tour to South Africa and other countries; and the record of a conversation held on an intranet platform. According to the report, from 7 January to 18 January, 2009, six officials of the court took an eleven-day study trip to survey developments in South Africa, Egypt, and Turkey via the United Arab Emirates.^{15, 16} During the trip, they spent RMB 480,000 (over US \$75,000). It was argued that this expense claim was much higher than the regular travel expenses for travel to those countries, but the documents

13. "Big Blast in the North of Nanjing", 28 July, 2010, posted on Sina BBS, available at: <<http://nj.bbs.house.sina.com.cn/thread-5118927-1.html>> [Accessed: 27 December, 2010]
14. "A Chinese Official Disallowed Live Broadcasting While on Live TV", 28 July, 2010, video file, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffp5V_HTEE> [Accessed: 27 December, 2010].
15. "How The Member Make Up The Aboard Study Report", June 3rd, 2009, available at: <<http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1581756.shtml>> [Accessed: 3 January 2011].
16. "How The Member Make Up The Aboard Study Report", June 3rd, 2009, available at: <<http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1581756.shtml>> [Accessed: 3 January 2011].

also raised questions over whether the purpose of the trip was accurately reported.

One of the documents posted online described the importance and urgency of the visit, justifying it by stating: "in recent years, judicial cases related to oil pollution at sea have been increasing, with lots of victims, high claims of compensation and more related to foreign affairs... oil contamination and land-based pollution are great threats to sea, beach and harbour, which has a great impact on residents' lives, arousing intense public concern. Resolving marine pollution disputes has a major impact on protection of the marine environment, development of the marine economy, and protection of people's legal rights". Therefore, the report wrote, "Our court plans to accept the invitation from courts of Johannesburg, South Africa, and an association of lawyers in Cairo, Egypt, and local courts in Istanbul, Turkey, to conduct research during a 12 day trip".

The group planned to conduct research on "how to understand and enforce international conventions when dealing with oil spill and pollution cases; understand their domestic legal systems, clarify jurisdiction over marine pollution, identify appropriate application of law and statutes on particular subjects; and the subjects of liability, damage assessment, insurance and payment, arbitration of oil pollution cases, and the functions of organizations, such as the Cairo lawyers association, etc".

These were legitimate aims, but netizens drew attention to the report of this trip as lacking genuine findings or insights on the matters that were used to justify the travel. Much of the report described the basic geography of the countries, which was far from the purpose of their mission and available without travelling to these locations. Some highlighted that the report had simply copied extracts of text from other articles, and they underlined sentences that bloggers suspected to have been simply cut and pasted from newspaper articles or induction materials given by various overseas agencies. Several activist netizens also revealed more information about these officials, which raised questions about the adequacy of their resumes and a number of controversial cases that they had been in charge of resolving.

Most telling was that the report had no explicit description of "maritime oil pollution and land-based pollution problems". Instead it wrote: "in Johannesburg we visited the District Court. The Chief Judge gave us a warm reception and invited

us to attend the trial he is in charge of"; "In the outskirts of Cairo we saw rivers full of garbage"; and in Istanbul, "we visited a local court, and attended the hearings". In addition, one blog-post showed the conversation on an intranet platform between members of the court. One official left a message for another saying, "I have searched for a long time but did not find detailed information on the ship oil pollution lawsuit in South Africa and other two countries. Sorry, I have to send it like this..." suggesting that much of the research was desk or Internet research, and not done on the ground or in ways that required a visit of the delegation.

On 10 June 2009, the Court held a news conference stating that "this overseas visit went through a strict process of application in accordance with the time, route and agenda, and was approved by higher level officials". It also stated that "the cost of this visit, RMB 480,000, did not exceed the budget" (Hong and Liang 2009). These responses led to another round of critiques, which lasted for several months. On 15 October 2009, Luo Guohua, Chief Judge of Guangzhou Maritime Court, was fired.

Cross-Cutting Patterns and Themes

These mini-cases reveal clear illustrations of how networked individuals - netizens - can play a Fifth Estate role. Netizens were able to source information, network with others, and widely distribute information that challenged more powerful institutions and actors. By speaking and networking the truth in ways that countered misinformation and politically oriented communication strategies, netizens were able to hold government agencies, mass media, and judicial agencies accountable in ways that influenced real decisions and actions. While limited to three mini-cases, the role of netizens were so obviously instrumental in each case that it is clear that networked individuals in China can - on occasion - provide a basis for more democratic accountability.

This section briefly describes a number of patterns and themes across these cases that help illuminate the political dynamics of the Fifth Estate and the role of what might be called the semi-sovereign netizen.

The Role of a Fifth Estate in Enhancing Democratic Accountability

First, the cases all illustrate how networked individuals were able to source their own information, independent of the press

and the state's apparatus, and also network with like-minded individuals in ways that could hold other institutions more accountable. The press might be state-controlled, but when it failed to report events or cover key issues that could be demonstrably seen online, then its credibility was weakened. In Nanjing, when netizens photographed the impact of the gas explosion and distributed it globally, its importance could not be denied. Likewise, the official accounts of the Guangzhou Maritime Court were discredited by bloggers who critically looked at the reports of the agency, and the concerns raised by bloggers were corroborated through multiple sources. In such ways, even in China, despite controls on the press and Internet users, these cases provide evidence of the emergence of a Fifth Estate of networked individuals, capable of enhancing the accountability of major institutional actors.

In fact, each one illustrated that efforts to exert state control tended to have the exact opposite effect- the so-called *Streisand effect*. The American entertainer, Barbara Streisand, sought to suppress information about her home, only to magnify its coverage online (Greenberg, 2007). In each of the three cases, there were clear attempts to suppress or limit coverage by the press, which might well have contributed in part to the vitality of online exposure. Censorship in the digital age can 'backfire' (Cacciottolo, 2012), in part because of the role of a Fifth Estate.

Dynamics of Reframing Issues and the Scope of Debate

Secondly, netizens did reframe discussion of each of the three events. One of the most critical aspects of Schattschneider's (1960) perspective on the dynamics of political conflicts is the role of that agenda-setting and issue-framing can play in the outcome of political conflict. As Schattschneider argued, the most important strategy of politics is to control the scope of conflict. As he (1960, p. 105) put it: "Whoever decides what the game is about, decides also who can get into the game". In each case, the success of networked individuals was tied to their ability to challenge official accounts - or lack of official accounts - with information that reframed the issue at stake. In each case, this reframing changed the scope of the debate and the political dynamics of the event.

Agenda-setting has been a focus of research on the media in China. For example, Jonathan Hassid (2012) has examined a number of case studies to assess the role of blogging, asking whether blogs increase or decrease political tensions. He

found that the impact of blogging depended on whether bloggers led or followed the mass media agenda. If bloggers initiated issues, they tended to raise tensions, while they reduced tensions when they followed the press agenda. We did not focus on leading or following media coverage, but on whether networked individuals, which include but are not only bloggers, reframed the issues. We have sought to put the impact of blogging into a bigger picture, focused on the role of a Fifth Estate.

For example, the cases show that discussion of the PX chemical plant was shifted from a source of local jobs and economic development to a public health hazard. There was sufficient consensus early in the process for the construction to be launched with approval by key agencies as an economic development milestone for Xiamen. However, opposition by local media, experts, including reputable scientists, bloggers, and protesters, whose actions were orchestrated in part through the Web-based campaign, shifted the issue from economic benefit to an environmental and health hazard for the local community.

In Nanjing, blogs and social media discussion of the gas explosion in Nanjing rapidly reconfigured debate by making what was framed as a routine investigation of the failure of a construction company to follow proper standards, to be recast as a cover up of a serious explosion and resulting safety issues. This created a major issue over the credibility of the press and the competence of public officials in protecting public safety, implying they had something to hide. Rather than control rumours and contain conflict, restrictions redefined the issue and the contestants.

Similarly, by challenging the expense claims of officials in the Guangzhou Maritime Court, bloggers reframed a story about officials on a study visit to investigate practices in other countries, to be seen as involved in a wasteful 'boondoggle', if not an official scandal over misleading expense claims for a holiday. Anti-corruption resonated with a broad public.

How the Internet Supports the Role of Netizens

A number of factors contributed to the ability of the Internet to support the Fifth Estate role of netizens in these cases.

The Limits of Filtering and Control of Netizens

Networked individuals - Netizens - were able to overcome efforts to filter and block information in ways that enabled

them to source critical information and locate others who had similar concerns. The stark example is Nanjing, where bloggers posted information about the gas explosion within an hour of the explosion, accompanied by graphic photographs and videos of the aftermath. Even more dramatic was the video clip shared online of an official interrupting a live TV channel claiming that the station did not have permission to broadcast about the event. As noted above, in these cases, the Streisand effect was real. Efforts to censure tended to raise the profile of the event, and the legitimacy of the information provided online.

Episodes of Contagion: Striking a Popular Chord

Issues were identified that struck a chord with netizens, evidenced by the rapid spread of support, what Shattschneider called contagion. For instance, tweets went viral around the need for donations of blood after the Nanjing explosion. The Web-orchestrated campaign in Xiamen led to a huge popular vote and turnouts at meetings in opposition to the project. Moreover, an impact on contagion could be evidenced by the sheer level of online activity. In this way, the Internet not only enabled many people to easily make very limited expressions of support, but also provided social information and was likely to have reinforced the depth and scale of support for the issue to engage a critical mass of citizens in each case. Netizens could see online and in public forums and protests that others shared their views. However, the degree to which an issue can capture the public's attention is difficult to gauge in advance, as well as its failure in most cases, given the degree to which these cases are exceptions to the norm. Nevertheless, they show the democratic potential of the Internet as a tool for accountability, which can cause institutions to anticipate this potential and therefore self-regulate themselves to avoid embarrassment or censure.

Protecting the Safety and Anonymity of Netizens

Netizens felt safe to participate online. Whether it was a case of safety in numbers or a sense of anonymity, netizens were told they were safe, and felt safe enough from retribution, that they were able to participate online and in live protests. In the case of the PX campaign, repeated messages reassured netizens that it was safe to express their views online, underscoring the significance of this perception.

One factor contributing to the safety of netizens was the degree that the Fifth Estate creates a moving target. Actions by the Fifth Estate are difficult to sustain overtime, because

they are not institutionalized. In these cases, however, sustainability was not an issue. In each case, netizens were able to reframe the issue rapidly and build on the mobilization of a sizeable public to effect change in a short period of time. It was not necessary to sustain their campaign for extended periods, which could have reversed their gains and enabled the government to undermine their role. And because these Fifth Estate actions can arise spontaneously and then disappear when the issue is engaged, they are difficult if not impossible to control. There is no institution to repress.

Social Movements as Only One Strategy of the Fifth Estate

Similarly, the cases also illustrate that the Fifth Estate is distinct from a social movement. Networked individuals can hold government and the press more accountable even if acting in their individual capacities. The Fifth Estate is not equivalent to a social movement. A political movement did arise around the PX project, leading to some local protests, but social movements were not central to either of the other cases. A movement is one of many potential strategies of networked individuals, as they redefine the issue and the scope of the conflict. This distinction helps underline the point that the ability to source information and networks could lead to social movements, but not necessarily. The empowerment of networked individuals, for example, could undermine a social movement, such as by challenging the narrative of its leadership, correcting misinformation, and preventing the spread of false rumours.

Summary and Conclusion

The Fifth Estate concept captures the democratic potential of the Internet to be used in ways that create new forms of more pluralistic accountability. Even in China, with a record of efforts to control media and information technologies, it is possible to find dramatic evidence of how a Fifth Estate role can be played by networked individuals.

This concept is valuable by moving away from conventional views of e-democracy, which view the Internet as a tool for transforming democratic institutions, such as parliamentary consultation or elections. Instead, the Internet can support the empowerment of individuals with access to and skills in the use of this technology. It can be used to enhance the communicative power of individuals through a variety of strategies, such as enabling netizens to reframe political controversy.

Decades ago, E. E. Schattschneider used the concept of the semi-sovereign people to counter idealistic models of representative democracy, often anchored in assumptions about a large proportion of the public being knowledgeable and aware of most issues, and representatives reflecting the weight of public opinion. In the same way, debate over digital democracy continues to be shaped by ideal models of democracy, suggesting that the Internet enables politics to move toward these ideal models, illustrating the potential relevance of Schattschneider's counter-models based on more realistic models of pluralist democracy. One element of his formulation assumes that people get involved intermittently, primarily around conflicts (issues), and controlling the scope of conflicts – such as by defining the issues – is the central strategy of politics.

Netizens, such as by creating and sourcing their own information resources, can undermine the ability of authorities to control the definition of conflicts and the subsequent scope of conflicts. They represent another source of authority in a more pluralist process and thereby can alter the dynamics and outcome of the political process. It is this more limited albeit more realistic role of the public that gives rise to the concept of the semi-sovereign people. Similarly, netizens acting as a Fifth Estate cannot approach the power and authority of the state and other institutional authorities, but they can sometimes surface new information, independently of key institutional actors, redefine issues and effect meaningful change in the scope and outcome of politics by independently sourcing information and networks.

However, the case studies explored here also highlight limitations of the Fifth Estate. First, these are exceptional

cases. In most instances, netizens have not succeeded in challenging state policy and the state controlled press coverage of events. The Fifth Estate does not routinely provide a source of democratic accountability, but has presented the potential to do so. That said, this possibility of accountability can have an important influence on institutions that recognize this democratic potential.

Secondly, the role of the Fifth Estate is not necessarily optimal for all stakeholders as it can be redistributive in creating unanticipated negative consequences, such as in blocking the PX plant, but leading it to be moved to another locale. Of course, this is true of any successful political action – the potential to result in unintended or unanticipated negative consequences or spill-over effects.

Nevertheless, these dramatic cases of netizens changing the dynamics of public issues in China illustrate the possibility for a Fifth Estate role to emerge even in the context of a state controlled media. This underscores the need for more comparative case studies of Fifth Estate activities in China and other nations with more and less considerable state regulation of the press and the Internet in order to further develop the themes and patterns identified by this study. This article provides some evidence that the Fifth Estate could hold out a promise for taking studies of the Internet in China beyond the agenda setting framework, by placing agenda-setting within a more comprehensive political framework. While these exceptional cases do not validate our theoretical perspective, they do reinforce the viability of the concept of the Fifth Estate as a framework for understanding the political dynamics of the Internet in nations that are not liberal democratic regimes with a free press.

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