Chapter 17
Internet Use and Governance in China

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ABSTRACT
As Internet use increases rapidly in China, its governance implications have been debated among researchers. This chapter provides a brief discussion of the complex relationship between Chinese Internet use and Chinese governance regarding the development of the Internet infrastructure, the level and form of Internet use, the “dark” side of the Internet and its control, and the provision of electronic government services. We argue that Internet use in China has been shaped by China’s governance structure, but at the same time it is changing, albeit slowly, that structure.

INTRODUCTION
Internet use—the use of the Internet in political, social, organizational, and individual lives—has received significant attention from researchers, as the Internet has transformed and is still transforming human life across the globe. While there exists large variation in the rates of interest use between developed and developing countries and even among the developing countries, countries lagging behind are quickly catching up and there seems to be a rapid conversion to long-run equilibrium (Chinn & Fairlie, 2010). In China, the Internet has become increasingly popular among citizens due to its widespread and timely information dissemination, convergent information formation, unconstrained usage and diverse contents. The Internet has also become an inseparable part of the economic development and business innovation in this fast growing economy. Thus, there has been a rise of Chinese “Internet studies” that discuss the development and consequences of the Internet in China (e.g., Harwit & Clark, 2001; Holliday & Yep, 2005; Kluver & Yang, 2005; Ma, Chung...
This chapter discusses Internet use and governance in China. While there is no doubt that internet use for various purposes has been rapidly increasing, its political or governance consequence is still being debated. On the one hand, there is a widespread belief among political leaders (e.g., Bill Clinton and George W. Bush) and commentators that the Internet will bring freedom and democracy to China and other authoritarian regimes (Taubman, 1998). This is partly the reason why there has been great interest in the Chinese Internet practice. On the other hand, there is disappointment among many observers that democratization has not been achieved in China and the political control and censorship over the Internet has yet to be loosened (Chung, 2008; Liang & Lu, 2010; McNally & Wright, 2010). Given the space limit, this chapter provides only a brief overview of the issue, demonstrating the complex relationship between Internet use and Chinese governance regarding four aspects: the development of the Internet infrastructure; the level and form of Internet use; the “dark” side of the Internet and its control; and the provision of electronic government services.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Internet use has gained significant attention from policy makers and researchers because of its potentially huge impact on economic development, social structure, information flow, political dynamics, and democratization. This is not only true for internet use in the political and administrative arenas, such as online political participation and the use of e-government services, but also true for internet use in civic and personal arenas, such as reading online news, publishing blogs, using emails, and visiting social networking sites. The impact of the latter on the economy, social interactions, and information flow is more immediate than on politics and democratization (e.g., via the change of social structure, the rise of social movements, and the improvement of citizenship, etc.), which requires a long-term incremental perspective.

A long-term perspective is required in thinking about the impact of Internet use on governance (social and political) also because the relationship between the two is not one-way but two-way. Governance can be viewed as a set of institutions that regulate or enable actors who interact with one another in social and political relationships. Democratic governance, ultimately, is a set of democratic institutions that define the actions and interactions between citizens and their representatives (or those who make decisions for the state). Therefore, the relationship between governance and internet use can be explained with the general theory about the relationship between institutions and technology, which depicts institutions and technology as shaping each other (Fountaine 2001; Singh, 2002; Yang, K., 2003). If the effects of the Internet are affected by the past or current governing institutions, then its potential in leading to a transformed governance cannot be realized overnight. What we observe will be a long-term co-evolution of the Internet and governance.

The belief that internet use will necessarily bring about democratization and political change in China reflects a perspective of technological determinism. Technological determinism states that the effect of technologies cannot be resisted and will necessarily occur given the technologies’ autonomous, exogenous, and transforming influence on individuals, institutions, and society (Bekker & Homberg, 2005; Fountaine, 2001). Technological determinists consider the Internet the most important development in our lifetimes that allows more opportunities for citizen participation, direct decision making, and democracy, with an impact on society comparable to that of the alphabet (Castell, 1996; Norris, 2001). On its extreme, technological determinism may become technological utopianism, which submits that
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