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**China's Public Opinion Control in the Platform Era:
News, Media Power, and State-platform Collaborative Governance**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

This work is entirely conducted by the candidate. None of the work has been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

The rise of Chinese digital media platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao) in the news sphere has transformed China's news landscape. These private platforms are increasingly sitting at the centre of news production, distribution and consumption, leading to a "platform-centered news ecosystem" in China. Such an ecosystem has brought profound changes to China's media power structure: platforms have become the "battlefields" for shaping public opinion and the central gatekeepers and governors of online news and information; self-media (individual news producers) rise as important news actors; state-controlled news organizations are in relative decline. Based on in-depth interviews with senior people from Chinese platforms and news organizations (some of whom are also self-media operators) and document analysis (e.g. of government regulations, official documents from platforms, media outputs, and third-party reports), this thesis has concluded that, despite bringing some challenges to the Chinese party-state's public opinion control, platforms turn out to be an effective Internet governance tool, rather than a disruptive force, to the state. Given that Chinese platforms are not only passively cooperating, but also actively collaborating with the party-state in public opinion control and wider contexts, this thesis proposes a "collaborative governance" model in relation to China's public opinion control. Under this model, the Chinese party-state only needs to target and control a number of major platforms, which have the technological capabilities and surveillance resources to enforce Internet governance on behalf of the state.

List of Abbreviations

- CAB: Cyberspace Administration of Beijing
- CAC: Cyberspace Administration of China
- CAICT: China Academy of Information and Communications Technology
- CASS: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
- CCAC: Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission
- CCP: Chinese Communist Party
- CCTV: China Central Television
- CGTN: China Global Television Network
- CMG: China Media Group
- CNNIC: China Internet Network Information Centre
- CPD: Central Publicity Department
- CPPCC: Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
- CYL: Communist Youth League
- INIS: Internet News Information Service
- MAU: Monthly Active Users
- MIIT: Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
- NPC: National People's Congress
- PAINIS: Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services
- PAIGIS: Provisions for the Administration of Internet Groups Information Services
- PD: Publicity Department
- RISJ: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
- SAPPRFT: State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV
- SART: State Administration of Radio and TV
- SCIO: State Council Information Office
- SIIO: State Internet Information Office
- UFWD: United Front Work Department
- WVOA: Weibo, WeChat and One App

Chapter 1: Introduction

A dominant and monopolistic Tencent¹ is absolutely detrimental to the nation [...]. Today it shows ferocious authority towards news media, and tomorrow it will challenge the authority of the state [my translation²] (BBC Chinese, 2016)

—Xu Shiping³, editor-in-chief of *eastday.com*, 2016

In November 2016, Xu Shiping, the editor-in-chief of *eastday.com* (东方网), a Chinese news website based in Shanghai, published two open letters addressed to Ma Huateng, co-founder and CEO of China's Internet giant Tencent, over the suspension of a WeChat official account run by the news website (Tmtpost, 2016). WeChat (微信) is China's most popular messaging and social media platform owned by Tencent. The official account *News Breakfast*, with 400,000 subscribers at the time, was suspended because a news piece from it was reported by news consumers, and confirmed by WeChat, as "rumour". In his open letters, Xu did not focus on whether the reported piece was rumour or not, instead he pointed to the formidable power of WeChat and Tencent over news outlets like *eastday.com* and the possible challenges Tencent might pose to the state, as shown in the above quotation.

Xu raised a number of concerns in his letters. Firstly, this incident demonstrated the governance power of Tencent, a private Internet company, over China's news media. In Xu's words, such an arrangement damaged "the honor of journalism". Xu, who was the former vice director of Shanghai's online content regulator, openly complained that even his personal intervention of making a series of calls to officials responsible for Internet regulation in Beijing and Guangdong (Tencent is based in Guangdong province) achieved little, as WeChat still maintained the suspension of the

¹Tencent is one of China's Internet giants, based in China's southern province Guangdong. Tencent is dominating China's social media, instant messaging, and online games markets.

²Direct quotations from Chinese translated by the author will be indicated throughout as [my translation].

³In this thesis, a Chinese name is given in the order of surname + first name. Take the name "Xu Shiping" as an example: "Xu" is the surname and "Shiping" the first name. This is how Chinese names are structured.

account. Secondly, the governance mechanism that led to the account suspension decision—whether it was Tencent’s algorithm or the judgement of a third-party institution commissioned by Tencent—was not transparent. Thirdly, Tencent had accumulated immense amounts of user data through platforms such as WeChat; allowing a private company to possess such data is not in the interests of the public.

In response to Xu’s thinly veiled accusations, WeChat’s security team, which was responsible for dealing with user complaints, issued a statement explaining why they had made and maintained the account-suspension decision (Tmtpost, 2016). Firstly, the reported piece, titled *Why the Savory Roast Ducks Are only Priced at 19 Yuan*,⁴ had been confirmed as rumour by professional third parties, and some authoritative media outlets, including *People’s Daily Online* (the official news website of *People’s Daily*), had already refuted such rumours. Secondly, the official account *News Breakfast* had breached the rules of WeChat multiple times, so the account was automatically suspended for 7 days. Thirdly, fighting online rumours is in the interests of the public, and WeChat, as a “platform”, has heavy responsibilities in maintaining a healthy platform ecology and being “objective and neutral” to all users. Overall, WeChat’s response focused on the technical side of the issue (namely, the specific reasons why the account was suspended) and emphasized its responsibilities as a “platform”, rather than the bigger and wider concerns raised by Xu.

This incident drew much attention among China’s media and Internet industry and generated much discussion on social media and online forums, making it among the top ten trending stories on China’s Twitter-like Weibo (BBC Chinese, 2016). While many online users agreed with the point that Tencent might be too dominant in China’s online content world, their criticism mainly pointed towards Xu’s arrogance for a number of reasons.⁵ First, Xu did not sincerely apologize for *eastday.com*’s spreading of the rumour. Another

⁴“Yuan” is the Chinese currency. One pound (£) equals around nine Yuan.

⁵Online users’ opinions synthesized here were based on discussions on Zhihu (Chinese version of Quora), China’s biggest online Q&A platform. Available from: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/52276173/answer/129808301> (Accessed 12 October 2018)

reason is that he publicly asked for special treatment for his website on the ground that it is an official news outlet, and thus showed no respect for the rules of WeChat and the rights of other types of users (e.g., individual authors). Last, Xu showed off his personal connections with Internet regulation officials and tried to exert political pressure on WeChat. For many users, in this single case, WeChat seemed to have played the role of a responsible platform and even showed laudable bravery when facing serious accusations from a senior media executive and former media official.

The above “Xu Shiping vs. Tencent” case touched on many elements relevant to this thesis, including tensions between news organizations and platforms; the strategic or discursive use of the term “platform” (in this case, WeChat called itself a “platform” and claimed that it had to be “objective and neutral” to all users); the governance power and responsibilities of platforms; user data accumulated by platforms; and state-platform relations. These issues are certainly not limited to China, and they have been discussed and debated in Western contexts and in a global context. However, the “Xu Shiping vs. Tencent” case has its distinct characteristics set in China’s context, where news organizations are the mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); and the power of private platforms in the news sphere has raised concerns about its potential challenges to the authority of the CCP-led state (or the party-state).

While platforms have brought disruption to the news industry in both China and the West, the key concern arising from their rise is quite different between them. In Western democracies, the key concern is generally linked to public interest or public values (e.g., Mansell, 2015; Napoli, 2015; Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal, 2018). There has been an expanding literature about the influence of platforms on issues of public interest, such as the functioning of established democratic processes (e.g., Persily, 2017; Tambini, 2018a), freedom of speech (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015; Rosen, 2012), journalism (Bell et al., 2017), and media pluralism (Helberger, Kleinen-von Konigslow and van der Noll, 2015). In contrast, in China, while platforms do cause concerns about issues like journalism (mainly within the media industry), the

key concern is their implications for the party-state's public opinion control. This leads to my research topic of this thesis: the power of platforms in China's news sphere and its implications for the party-state's public opinion control.

1.1 Research background

In recent years, US-based digital media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Apple News, have been increasingly sitting at the centre of news processes (news production, distribution and consumption) in many countries (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2016; 2017; 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018), leading to the phenomenon of “platformization” of news (Van Dijck et al., 2018:51). The same trend has been witnessed in China, where Chinese domestic platforms like WeChat, Weibo (Twitter-like microblogging site), and Jinri Toutiao (literally means “Today's Headlines”, referred to as Toutiao throughout) are playing a role similar to their Western peers in China's evolving news environment (CNNIC, 2017).

In this thesis, I use the term “digital media platforms” (or “platforms” for brevity) to describe Chinese social media platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) and mobile news aggregators (e.g., Toutiao). These platforms have two key characteristics. First, they host huge amounts of *news* content (though news may only be a small part of the content they host). In this project, “news” is understood in a general sense, referring to both factual news and news commentaries or editorials and to both hard news (such as political, economic, military, and foreign affairs news) and soft news (such as entertainment and sports news). The reason to focus on news content is that, compared to other types of content such as TV entertainment, news content is more closely linked to public opinion. In the West, studies concerning the media's agenda-setting and framing effects, the two most researched theories of media effects linked to public opinion (see section 3.1.1), usually focus on the influence of news coverage on public opinion (e.g., Entman, 2004; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar and Simon, 1993). In China, “news” and “public opinion” are often mentioned together in the party-state's official rhetoric, such as the common phrase “news and public opinion work” (新闻舆论工作) (e.g.,

People's Daily Online, 2018a), suggesting that in the eyes of the party-state, "news" is supposed to have the potential to influence public opinion. That is why gathering and producing news in key areas (i.e., public affairs like politics, economy, and foreign affairs; and breaking social incidents) is still a privilege reserved for state-controlled news organizations in China (CAC, 2017a).

Another key feature of these platforms is that they provide *open publishing space* for a wide variety of actors, including news organizations, individual authors, institutions (governmental and non-governmental), and enterprises. A typical "open publishing space" service is WeChat's "Official Accounts Platform", which allows various types of actors to create "official accounts" (or called "public accounts") and publish content *within* WeChat. Here, "official accounts" are different from ordinary user accounts on platforms. They are similar to Facebook's "page" accounts, which are mainly "for businesses, brands, organizations and public figures to share their stories and connect with people" (Facebook, n.d.-a).

Since WeChat launched its Official Accounts Platform in 2012, almost all Chinese major Internet companies, such as Alibaba, Baidu, Bytedance, Sina, Netease, and Sohu, have launched their own open-publishing services, or turned their early-generation mobile news apps (aggregating news mainly from news organizations) into similar platforms (e.g., Feng, 2017). This open-publishing feature of Chinese platforms is also referred to as "native-hosting" service, which means various types of news producers publish content within platforms through their official accounts, rather than publish their content elsewhere and then share the titles and links on platforms.

Among the millions of official accounts on platforms, most of them are self-media (自媒体) (e.g., Techweb, 2015; Chyxx.com, 2018), explaining why digital media platforms in China are often called "self-media platforms". In this thesis, "self-media" refers to official accounts run by individual authors

or a small group of people. Survey data, conducted by Penguin Intelligence (a research unit owned by Tencent) in 2016, showed that around 95% of self-media were run by one single person or a team with less than 5 people (Penguin Intelligence, 2017a). Self-media operators differ from amateur bloggers, in that they produce news content on a regular basis and aim to make a living by doing it (see section 5.1.2 for more detailed discussion on the features of self-media).

The rise of platforms and self-media in the news sphere has not only transformed China's news environment, but also brought changes to its media power structure (e.g., Ji, Ma and Zhang, 2016). This situation has caused great concerns within the news industry and the CCP's top leadership. As one commentary from *Xiakedao*, a WeChat official account run by the overseas edition of the CCP's central mouthpiece *People's Daily*, warned:

Information dissemination is diversified and fragmented. A real army is no rival of the guerilla (opinions spreading on social media). It becomes a crisis of traditional media [...]. Official and unofficial opinions are very different ... and even contradictory [...]. If the gap lasts, it will erode the legitimacy of the rule, and destabilize the root of the party and the state (Mai, 2016).

The above quotation shows that, in the eyes of an official news outlet, China's changing media power structure could be a disruptive force to professional news organizations, and even to the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Given that the messages conveyed by *People's Daily*, the central mouthpiece of the CCP, often represent or at least reflect the viewpoints of China's top leadership (Cui and Wu, 2015; Wu, 1994), the concerns voiced in this commentary may represent concerns of the Chinese party-state.

In recent years, Chinese president Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the challenges arising from the Internet and new media. In his speech at the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference in August 2013, Xi claimed that "The Internet has become the main battlefield for public opinion

struggle”, which relates to China’s “ideological security and regime security” (Meng, 2018:131). In another speech later that year, Xi pointed to social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat as a particular risk:

[Social media] disseminate information rapidly, have a big influence and broad coverage, and have a strong ability to mobilize society [...] how [we] strengthen the legal system and public opinion guidance, guarantee the orderly spread of information online, national security, and social stability, has already become a real and prominent problem (Mozur, 2013).

The above quotation from Xi Jinping is exemplary in explaining why the Chinese top leadership is concerned about the role of social media platforms, given that they have the inherent features and abilities of social mobilization. In the above quotation, Xi also emphasized the urgency to strengthen Internet governance and public opinion guidance to guarantee “national security” and “social stability”, a common official rhetoric in normalizing Internet control in China (Cui and Wu, 2015).

The concerns of the Chinese party-state over the implications of platforms for public opinion control are not hard to understand, as “authoritarian regimes by their nature focus tightly on staying in power” (Walker and Orttung, 2014:73). The outcome or effectiveness of public opinion control relates to the CCP’s legitimacy of rule and even its survival. Using Xi’s own words, the CCP could face a ruling crisis “if it cannot pass the test of the Internet and new media [my translation]” (Zhang, 2017).

1.2 Research questions

Given that platforms have brought profound transformations to China’s news environment and caused growing concern to the party-state in relation to public opinion control, it is timely to undertake in-depth research to address the overall research question of this thesis: *How do digital media platforms influence China’s news sphere and the party-state’s public opinion control?*

To answer this research question, a series of sub-questions need to be addressed:

- (1) How do platforms influence China's news processes (news production, distribution, and consumption)?
- (2) What changes have platforms brought to China's media power structure?
- (3) What challenges have platforms brought to the Chinese party-state's public opinion control?
- (4) How does the Chinese party-state respond to the challenges in relation to public opinion control (such as through regulations or adjusting its Internet governance approach)?
- (5) How do the Chinese party-state and platforms interact with each other in relation to public opinion control and in wider areas?
- (6) What is the outcome of the role and power of platforms in China's news sphere for the Chinese party-state's public opinion control?

Regarding the above research questions and the approaches to answer them, there are several points worth noting or further clarifying. Firstly, this project covers a time period roughly since 2012, when China's major digital media platforms like WeChat and Toutiao started to demonstrate their influence in the news sphere.⁶ This time period coincides with the period under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, who took power in China since the 18th CCP National Congress held in November 2012. There has been discussion about how President Xi has been strengthening media and Internet control in China in a more repressive way (e.g., Bandurski, 2016; Repnikova, 2017). This project examines the implications of platforms for the party-state's public opinion control in such a political environment.

Secondly, it is useful to note that while there are many digital media platforms in China, this project has chosen to focus on three major platforms: WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao, given that they are among the most popular, influential and recognized (by the public and the state) platforms in China (see section

⁶WeChat launched its Official Account Platform in 2012, and Toutiao was launched in 2012.

2.1.2 for more discussion). However, some other platforms will also be mentioned and discussed when necessary.

Thirdly, this thesis will not conduct audience research to evaluate media power or public opinion (these two terms will be defined in the next section). This is a deliberate choice. The main justification is that instead of focusing on media content and their influence on news consumers, this thesis has chosen a different path: focusing on the *structural changes* brought by platforms in relation to news processes, media power structure, and public opinion control. Many media scholars (e.g., Garnham, 2000; Mansell, 2004) have previously advocated examining issues like the structure of media production and hierarchies of power, rather than just focusing on media texts. In the platform era, such an approach seems more urgent, given that platforms “have penetrated the heart of societies” (including the news industry) and thus are “forcing governments and states to adjust their legal and democratic structures” (Van Dijck et al., 2018:3). To my best knowledge, no academic study has examined the influence of platforms on news processes, media power or public opinion control in China from a structural approach. Therefore, my aim in this thesis is to make a contribution in this area. While focusing on structural changes arising from platforms in China, it does not mean that this thesis overlooks the human factor within these changing structures. In fact, in-depth interviews with senior media professionals and executives from major platforms are a main method of this thesis. That is to say, this thesis examines the structural changes partly through the reflections of people from China’s media and Internet industries.

Fourthly, while this project examines a question set in China’s context, it adopts a comparative perspective whenever necessary or helpful. One benefit of this approach is that it may be able to “render the invisible visible”, as some features of one particular national context can be taken for granted when examined without comparison (Blumler and Gurevitch, as cited in Hallin and Mancini, 2004:2). However, a detailed or full comparison between the Chinese and Western platforms is beyond the scope of this thesis, given that this thesis focuses on China’s media context.

A final point worth noting is that my personal and professional background has led me to this topic naturally. As a former senior editor who worked for a Chinese official news organization for many years, I have experienced the changes brought by platforms to the daily routines of media organizations, witnessed the empowerment of self-media operators by platforms, and observed the changes in China's media power structure. Moreover, my working background in a Chinese central news organization has informed me about the crucial importance of public opinion control for the party-state.

1.3 Key concepts and analytical framework

To answer the research questions identified in the above section, it is necessary to define the two key concepts—media power and public opinion—for this thesis, as both concepts can be understood very differently from different perspectives or in different media contexts. Moreover, it is useful to provide a clear analytical framework to show how the three elements (news processes, media power, and public opinion control) are connected in this thesis, and how the research questions will be answered.

1.3.1 Key concepts: media power and public opinion

Both “media power” and “public opinion” are contested concepts without an agreed definition. Of them, “media power” can be defined and understood from different perspectives (e.g., Freedman, 2015; Van Dijk, 1995). Similarly, “public opinion” is “notoriously difficult to define. There are scores, if not hundreds, of variations on a definition” (Erikson and Tedin, 2015:7). This sub-section will clarify how these two concepts are defined and understood in this thesis.

Understanding media power

Drawing on scholars including Van Dijk (1995) and Castells (2009), I define “media power” as both a symbolic and a relational power. First, as a form of symbolic power, media power, in this project, refers to the assumed capacity or potential to shape the minds of news consumers. It is exactly because media power is understood as a mind-shaping power that the changing media power

structure in the platform era has caused concerns to the party-state's public opinion control. Second, as a form of relational power, media power is understood as the relationships between different media actors regarding the allocation of symbolic resources. From this second perspective, media power can be evaluated through power relations between news actors. In this project, I have identified five main news actors: the party-state, platforms, news organizations, self-media, and news consumers. Section 3.1 provides a more detailed discussion of the concept of "media power".

In this thesis, media power is discussed not only in relation to traditional media, but also in relation to digital media including platforms. It is worth noting that Western scholars have seldom used the term "media power" when discussing the power of platforms in the news sphere. This may be partly because in the West, US-based platforms are still largely considered as information "intermediaries" (e.g., Helberger et al., 2015; Tambini and Labo, 2016), rather than media companies. However, as platforms have become some of "the most significant new media organizations of the 21st century", there is a "potentially problematic gulf" between the role and functions of platforms in today's media environment and the way in which they are perceived and governed (Napoli, 2015: 752). In contrast, Chinese platforms are explicitly defined as online news providers and are regulated as such (CAC, 2017a). Therefore, it is justifiable to use the term "media power" in discussing the power of platforms regarding news, especially in China's context.

In discussing the media power of platforms, I have identified and differentiated two types of power that platforms exercise: gatekeeping power and governance power. There is no doubt that the media power of platforms is different from that of traditional media organizations. Firstly, while media organizations exercise gatekeeping power mainly through human editors (e.g., Shoemaker, 1991), platforms are exercising such power largely through algorithms (e.g., DeVito, 2017; Napoli, 2015). Secondly, platforms not only hold gatekeeping power, but also governance power over online news and information. Governance power is traditionally linked to governments and

other regulatory bodies (e.g., Goldsmith and Wu, 2006), rather than in the domain of media organizations.

Understanding public opinion in China

As mentioned above, “public opinion” is difficult to define. This is partly due to the difficulty in defining what the “public” is and what the “opinion” is about. For instance, set in the contexts of Western democratic societies, Erikson and Tedin (2015) define public opinion as “the preferences of the adult population on matters of relevance to government” (p.8). In this definition, the public is the “adult population”, and the opinion is about “matters of relevance to government”.

Drawing on Erikson and Tedin (2015), this thesis understands “public opinion” in China as the attitudes and opinions of the Chinese public towards matters of relevance to the image or reputation of the party-state. It is worth noting that this thesis will only focus on China’s *online* public opinion, which of course cannot fully represent the general public opinion in China. However, given that China’s news organizations are more strictly controlled and more burdened for public opinion guidance, the Internet is the only space that the Chinese public can express their opinions, albeit in a controlled way (People’s Daily Online, 2009). In other words, online public opinion is the closest available measurement of China’s public opinion. That is why, in this project, “public opinion” and “online public opinion” are used interchangeably.

The relations between the state and public opinion are quite different between democratic and authoritarian political and media systems. Western democratic governments are supposed to respond to public opinion (though this may not always be the case), as demonstrated in Robert Dahl’s words: “I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens” (1971:1). In contrast, as discussed above, the Chinese party-state attaches immense importance to public opinion *control*, although the authoritarian state has been found to be considerably, yet selectively, responsive to online public opinion (e.g., Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2016; Hassid, 2015; Su and Meng, 2016).

The selective responsiveness of the Chinese state will be further discussed in section 2.2.4.

In China, the state's public opinion control involves two forms of control: public opinion guidance (舆论引导) and public opinion supervision and management (舆论监管). Of them, public opinion guidance, the "dominant term within the CCP since 1989 to refer legitimately to press controls" (Bandurski, 2014: paragraph 3), can be seen as the "softer" or more subtle side of the state's control of public opinion. In practice, public opinion guidance mainly means ensuring news producers do not publish content conflicting with the CCP's directives⁷ and contemporary policies and to shape public opinion towards the party's preferences (e.g., Stockmann, 2013). The harder side of public opinion control involves more coercive methods employed by China's media and Internet regulators, such as content censorship and traditional coercive ways (e.g., sacking responsible editors and arresting relevant individuals).

1.3.2 Analytical framework

This thesis examines the question how platforms influence China's news sphere and the party-state's online public opinion control through a structural approach. It has identified three different but connected structures: (1) news flow structure, which focuses on news flow directions and interactions between the main news actors; (2) media power structure, which centers on the power relations between the main news actors; (3) Internet governance structure, which examines the governance relations among the main news actors. These structures are expected to provide a useful and visual roadmap in understanding the transformations or changes brought by platforms. The differentiation of these structures is important in this project, because a transformed news-flow (or news-processes) structure does not necessarily mean a transformed media power structure. Likewise, even though platforms have not changed the fundamental nature of the media power structure, they

⁷These directives are usually about "taboo topics to avoid or desirable content to stress" (Esarey and Xiao, 2008:769-770).

may have transformed China's Internet governance structure in relation to public opinion control.

Platforms and news flow structure

Examining the influence of platforms on news production, distribution and consumption serves at least two purposes. First, it will be able to reveal the main features of China's evolving news environment in the platform era. Moreover, investigating the news flow structure is expected to inform the analysis of China's media power structure and Internet governance structure, as it can identify some changes relating to the media power structure and some challenges to the party-state's public opinion control.

As this thesis will show, China's news flow structure, which was traditionally dominated by news organizations, has been profoundly transformed by platforms. Within the platform-era news flow structure, platforms are sitting at the centre, mediating and influencing all other actors; news organizations, self-media and state departments are three main types of news producers, and they publish and distribute content within platforms and engage with news consumers through platforms; news consumers are playing a dynamic role, interacting with all other actors. Based on these features, I argue that China's news environment has become a "platform-centered news ecosystem". The features of this ecosystem⁸ and its challenges to the party-state's control of public opinion will be examined in chapter 5.

It is worth noting that the term "news consumers" is not value-free. Comparing to other possible terms such as "news users" and "audiences", "news consumers" suggests that users now have more autonomy in their consumption of news, such as curating their own news feeds and influencing news production through making direct payments to news producers. This thesis prefers the term "news consumers" to the widely used "news users", also because "users" is a general and vague term in a platform-centered environment, referring to not only the end users, but also any entities like

⁸According to Dictionary.com, the word "ecosystem" means "a system or network of interconnecting and interacting parts". See the definition of "ecosystem": <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ecosystem> (Accessed 6 July 2019).

businesses and institutions that is facilitated by platforms to produce, distribute, or consume content (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Platforms and media power structure

Platforms have brought some obvious changes to China's media power structure. Firstly, platforms themselves and self-media that are empowered by platforms have become important news actors in the platform era. Secondly, platforms have undermined the role of news organizations as the dominant news sources, thus weakening their capability of shaping public opinion. These changes will be analyzed in chapter 6. However, these changes do not necessarily mean that platforms have transformed the fundamental nature of China's media power structure. In analyzing this structure, it is very important to discuss the role of the Chinese party-state as the media and Internet regulator.

China's media power structure in the platform era (see Figure 6.4) is much more complex than that in a pre-platform era, because several types of power relations co-exist within this structure. These power relations include: (1) news producers vs. news consumers; (2) platforms vs. news producers and news consumers; (3) the party-state (as the regulator) vs. other actors. These different power relations are interwoven, given that some actors have multiple roles. For example, platforms are gatekeepers and governors when interacting with news producers and news consumers, but they become the "regulated" news providers when interacting with the party-state.

While many scholars have pointed to the increasingly active and important role of news users (or news consumers, as called in this thesis) in a networked environment (e.g., Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Helberger et al., 2015; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2016), the agency (or resistance) of news consumers in the process of shaping public opinion is largely beyond the scope of this project. One justification for this approach is that, compared to news consumers, platforms, news producers and the party-state are assumed to be more powerful in the process of shaping public opinion. That is why the role of

news consumers is analyzed in the news flow structure, but not in the media power structure.

Apart from the five main actors, advertisers (and investors) are also included in the media power structure (though not as a main actor). This is because while platforms have facilitated alternative revenues for news producers (such as reader payment, see section 6.1.2), advertising income is still the main source of revenue for news producers and platforms. However, as the economic side of media transformation in the platform era is beyond the focus of this project, the role of advertisers and investors will only be discussed briefly and where relevant in this project.

Platforms and Internet governance structure

In examining the influence of platforms on the Chinese party-state's public opinion control, there are at least three aspects involved: first, what challenges have platforms brought to the state's public opinion control; second, how is the party-state responding to such challenges; and third, how do the party-state and platforms interact with each other in relation to public opinion control. The first aspect will be discussed in the analysis of China's news flow structure and media power structure, and the other two aspects relate to China's Internet governance and state-platform relations in the platform era.

Platforms have increasingly become the "central points of control" on the Internet (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015:761). Accordingly, the Chinese party-state has adjusted its Internet regulatory framework to mainly target platforms and required platforms to take the "main responsibilities" in governing their sites (CAC, 2016a). This adjustment has transformed China's Internet governance structure (see Figure 8.4). In a pre-platform era, the party-state is not only the media and Internet regulator, but also the main enforcer of media and Internet governance. Instead, as this thesis argues, in the platform era, platforms have become the main enforcer of Internet governance. In other words, Internet governance in China is largely enforced *through* platforms, which is what I call "governance through platforms".

Thus, it is necessary to differentiate “regulation” and “governance”. Of them, “regulation” is associated with the government or other inter-governmental regulatory bodies, while “governance” is used in a much wider sense, referring to various types of information and user controlling activities (such as content blocking or deletion, and user account suspension or closure) undertaken by a government or a private entity like a digital media platform (see section 3.2.2 for discussion of platform governance). Moreover, while “Internet regulation” is based on laws and regulations, “Internet governance” can be based on laws, regulations, standards, codes, policies, norms, agreements, and so on.

As this thesis will show, Chinese platforms are not only cooperating, but also collaborating with the party-state in public opinion control and other areas including economy, society and technological innovation (see section 8.1). According to Oxford Dictionaries, the word “cooperate” means “assist someone or comply with their requests”, while the word “collaborate” means “work jointly on an activity or project”.⁹ That is to say, “cooperate” often involves passive compliance, while “collaborate” emphasizes more an active and willing activity. The difference between them is subtle but critical to the core argument of this thesis.

Based on the above discussion, this thesis will argue for a state-platform “collaborative governance” model in relation to public opinion control in China. Compared to the pre-platform model, this new model has three main features: (1) it involves both control and collaboration; (2) Internet governance is mainly enforced through platforms; (3) platform surveillance is a crucial instrument for public opinion control, given that platforms have accumulated enormous amounts of user data. The features of this new governance model and its effectiveness and implications for public opinion control will be discussed in chapter 8.

1.4 My contributions

⁹See Oxford Dictionaries. For “cooperate”, see: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/cooperate> (Accessed 6 July 2019); for “collaborate”, see: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/collaborate> (Accessed 6 July 2019).

The first contribution of this thesis is filling a research gap about Chinese platforms. So far, most literature in the English language concerning the role of platforms in the news sphere is set in the Western contexts and platforms examined are mostly based in the United States. To my best knowledge, no existing study has investigated the influence of Chinese platforms *as a whole* on news processes, media power structure, and the party-state's public opinion control in China. In other words, this thesis is the first academic attempt to examine such an important issue. Part of the reason for such an obvious research gap is that the rise of Chinese platforms as important news actors is a very current issue. It is worth noting that despite some Chinese platforms coming into existence around a decade ago (for example, Weibo was launched in 2009), it was only a few years ago (roughly since 2012-2014) that these platforms started to develop into today's open-publishing platforms and to demonstrate their influence in the news sphere.

When it comes to research on digital media platforms, China is an important media context. This is because Chinese platforms are the closest comparable competitors to the US-based platforms in an economic sense, though currently their influence is mainly within China's domestic market (Barwise and Watkins, 2018). Through a comparative perspective, this thesis connects the much-needed research on Chinese domestic platforms to the rapidly expanding research on the US-based dominant platforms. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) observe, while Chinese and US-based platforms sit on the two ends of the ideological spectrums, they are "remarkably similar" in terms of their "socio-technical operation and political-economic governance" (p.164). This thesis will shed further light on the similarities and differences between Chinese and US-based platforms.

Another contribution is my original conceptual construction. While this thesis is mainly based on empirical data, it has developed original theoretical models concerning three different but connected structures to explain the transforming news and public opinion environment in China. Moreover, it has constructed several original concepts. One such concept is "platform-centered news ecosystem", which captures well the essence of a transformed

news environment in China. The second original concept is “governance through platforms”, which describes how Internet governance is enforced in China in the platform era. Another related original concept “state-platform collaborative governance” depicts the relations between the state and platforms in relation to Internet governance. The last concept provides a new Internet governance model in the platform era. This model is not necessarily limited to the Chinese context and has the potential to be applied in other national media contexts, especially in some specific content areas like hate speech and terrorism propaganda.

Besides, this thesis demonstrates its originality in the definition of some key concepts. In defining “media power”, this thesis has combined the two common perspectives: (1) media power as symbolic power; (2) media power as relational power. Thus, this thesis can focus on structural changes brought by platforms, and at the same time examine the power of news providers (i.e., news organizations, self-media and platforms) in shaping public opinion. Similarly, when discussing the media power of Chinese platforms, this thesis has combined two types of power: gatekeeping power and governance power, which have so far been discussed separately by scholars from different disciplines (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a; Helberger et al., 2015). By doing so, this project provides a useful framework in analyzing the media power of platforms.

1.5 Overview of chapters

This thesis contains nine chapters (including the introduction chapter and concluding chapter). Chapter 2 is a contextual chapter, examining the rise of platforms in China’s authoritarian media context. It provides necessary background about Chinese platforms (focusing on WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao), including their private ownership and news-related features, and investigates the key features of China’s authoritarian media system, focusing on the state-media relations.

Chapter 3 is the literature review chapter. It serves three purposes. Firstly, it provides a theoretical framework for the whole thesis by reviewing relevant

literature around concepts including media power, gatekeeping power and governance power. Secondly, by reviewing literature on discussions and debates around the media power of platforms, regulation of platforms, and Internet governance in the platform era, it connects this thesis with the wider context concerning the power of platforms in the news sphere. Thirdly, while reviewing the existing literature, it identifies some research gaps and indicates where this thesis can make its contributions.

Chapter 4 is the methodology chapter. This thesis is mainly based on empirical examination (though with distinct theoretical construction) of the structural changes brought by Chinese platforms. It adopts two complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured qualitative interviews and document analysis. This chapter discusses the overall research design, the sampling strategy, the data gathering process, and some relevant concerns (such as ethical concern) arising from the research.

Chapters 5-8 are the analysis and discussion chapters. Among them, Chapter 5 examines China's news flow structure in the platform era. It investigates the reasons behind the phenomenon of Chinese platforms as converging sites for news production, distribution, and consumption processes. Moreover, it examines how Chinese platforms influence news processes through their gatekeeping role. It further argues that China's news environment has become a "platform-centered news ecosystem" and discusses its features in relation to the implications for China's public opinion control.

Chapter 6 examines China's changing media power structure and how the party-state has been adjusting its strategy of public opinion guidance accordingly. It first examines how platforms have caused a media power shift in China, mainly the relative decline of news organizations and the rise of self-media as an important news actor. It then presents and discusses a model of China's media power structure in the platform era and examines how the party-state has been adapting its system of public opinion guidance.

Chapter 7 examines both governance *of* and governance *through* platforms in

China. The former investigates how the party-state regulates platforms in response to public opinion challenges. Governance *through* platforms examines how the party-state has adjusted its regulatory framework to require platforms to take the “main responsibilities” in governing their sites, and discusses the features, existing problems and mechanisms of this new governance approach.

Chapter 8 investigates state-platform collaboration and argues for a “collaborative governance” model in relation to public opinion control in China. It examines state-platform collaboration in public opinion control and wider contexts (economic, social and technological areas). In addition to discussing the features and effectiveness of the “collaborative governance” model, this chapter also examines the implications of some existing challenges for the party-state.

Chapter 9 is the concluding chapter of this thesis. In addition to synthesizing the main conclusions of this thesis, it explores the implications of this research in relation to previous literature and the applicability of the “collaborative governance” model in wider national contexts. It also reflects on some limitations of the research and identifies several possible future research directions.

Chapter 2: The rise of platforms in authoritarian China

We have been over-emphasizing the role of technologies and didn't realize that technologies must be guided by socialist core values and used to spread positive energy [my translation].¹⁰

—Zhang Yiming, founder and CEO of Bytedance (owner of Toutiao), 2018

Introduction

In many countries, the US-based “Big Five” (Alphabet-Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft) are the dominant players in the digital media platform markets (e.g., Van Dijck et al., 2018). In contrast, the Chinese digital media market is dominated by domestic private platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao. Compared to Western media platforms, Chinese platforms are less known to the outside world and their news-related features need to be examined. At the same time, the Chinese authoritarian media context, in which the party-state is the paramount actor, is also very different from Western media contexts. As the above quotation from Zhang Yiming shows, in China, private digital media platforms are expected to be guided by “socialist core values” and to spread “positive energy” in society, two common terms in official rhetoric concerning media and Internet control in the Xi Jinping era.¹¹ The rise of private platforms in China’s authoritarian media system has raised concerns regarding the media power structure and public opinion control.

This contextual chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides necessary background information about Chinese digital media platforms, especially the three main platforms (WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao) on which this thesis focuses. Secondly, it provides contextual information about China’s authoritarian media system in which Chinese platforms operate, focusing on

¹⁰ This quotation is from Zhang Yiming’s public apology letter released on 11 April 2018, after Bytedance was ordered to permanently close one of its popular mobile apps by China’s media regulator. See: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1597406820222785916&wfr=spider&for=pc>

¹¹ The two terms “socialist core values” and “positive energy” will be further discussed in later chapters (see section 6.2.2 and section 7.1.2).

the key features of China's state-media relations. Overall, this chapter sets the scene for later analysis chapters.

2.1 The rise of Chinese digital media platforms

In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid expansion of digital media platforms like WeChat and Toutiao. These platforms are increasingly sitting at the centre of China's news production, distribution and consumption, bringing profound transformation to China's news environment. This section provides some background information about China's digital media market, focusing on the major common features of Chinese platforms. In addition, this section also examines the news-related features of three particular platforms: WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao.

2.1.1 An overview of Chinese platforms

China's huge Internet population and the high percentage of Internet users who access news through mobile phones have contributed to the rapid development of digital media platforms (most of them including WeChat and Toutiao are mobile-based). According to the semi-annual *China Statistical Report on Internet Development* released by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), as of December 2018, China's Internet users had reached 829 million (or 59.6% of the population) (CNNIC, 2019). Among them, 81.4% have accessed online news, making news consumption the second most popular Internet application in China, only less popular than Instant Messaging services (Ibid.). The report also showed that, 98.6% Internet users used their mobile phones to access the Internet, while only 48% used their desktops to do so. Another CNNIC survey concerning China's online news consumption, conducted in early 2016, showed that digital media platforms have become the most popular gateway for Chinese mobile news consumers; around 75% of them had accessed news through WeChat during the last six months (CNNIC, 2017).

Partly because speech-related Western platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been blocked in mainland China, almost all major platforms in China are owned by domestic Internet companies. For example, WeChat is

owned by Internet giant Tencent; Weibo is mainly owned by Sina, with Internet giant Alibaba holding around 30% of its shares; and Toutiao is owned by Bytedance, a rapidly expanding Internet company. The dominance of domestic platforms is a very important feature of China's digital media market, having significant implications for China's Internet regulation, public opinion control and the state's "cyber power" strategy, to be discussed in chapter 7 and chapter 8.

Another important feature of China's digital media market is that almost all major platforms are privately owned, which is very different from the ownership of China's state-controlled news organizations (see next section). Most major platforms are owned by Internet companies that are publicly listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (e.g., Tencent) or US-based Nasdaq Stock Market (e.g., Baidu, Sina, and Netease) and New York Stock Exchange (e.g., Alibaba), which makes their ownership structure more complex. The private ownership of Chinese major platforms and Internet companies has caused some concerns within China, as demonstrated in the "Xu Shiping vs. Tencent" example (see chapter 1) and the so-called "Zhao Wei event", which was among China's Top 20 public opinion topics in 2016 (People's Daily Online, 2017). Zhao Wei is a Chinese famous actress and a movie director. In April 2016, the cast of a film directed by Zhao¹² drew much online criticism, as the Taiwanese male lead was found to be pro-Taiwan independence (China sees Taiwan as a breakaway province). Soon, Chinese Internet users discovered that many posts, comments, and accounts on Weibo and other platforms or websites criticizing the film were deleted. The most shocking moment for Internet users was when a Weibo post from an account run by the CCP's Communist Youth League (CYL),¹³ which shared an article criticizing Zhao's choice of actors, was also deleted. Internet users also discovered that Zhao is a major shareholder of Alibaba Pictures, a subsidiary of Alibaba and the investor of Zhao's film, and has strong connections to Alibaba's Chairman

¹²The film is a romance movie, titled "There is no other love"(没有别的爱). Its original male lead was Lion Dai, who was discovered by Chinese Internet users as having publicly participated in pro-Taiwan-independence activities in the past. Under huge pressure, Zhao eventually apologized to the public and replaced the lead male actor. The film has not been released yet.

¹³CYL is a youth movement for Chinese youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. It is an important institution in China and some of its leaders such as Hu Yaobang and Hu Jintao became the CCP's general secretary and China's president.

Jack Ma. Under pressure from the public, Weibo explained that the deletion of the CYL's post, which was soon restored, was due to automatic filtering triggered by a certain keyword (Sohu News, 2016). Although it is not known whether Zhao or Alibaba did try to suppress online criticism of the film, "Zhao Wei event" ignited a huge online storm pointing at assumed power of the private capital over China's online speech.

In China, there are two major types of digital media platforms: social media platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) and mobile news aggregators (e.g., Toutiao, Tencent News, Netease News, Baidu Baijiao, Yidian Zixun). This situation is different from many media markets, which are mainly dominated by social media platforms. According to the Digital News Report 2018, published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), only 6% of news consumers use news aggregators as their main news gateways in the surveyed 37 markets (mostly European, North American, and Asian markets) (Neuman et al., 2018). In contrast, in 2017, the average time Chinese news consumers spent on mobile news aggregators per day was estimated at around 70 minutes, 20% more than they did a year ago (Penguin Intelligence, 2018).

It is worth noting that while this thesis focuses on the role of platforms in China's news sphere, news content is just a part of the whole platform ecosystem. Take WeChat as an example. Apart from its news-related functions, WeChat has many more functions such as online payment and instant messaging. WeChat's multiple functions and its "connecting everything" ("连接一切") feature,¹⁴ as Tencent's slogan states, are important to understand its immense significance in China's society. That is why it is useful to see the rise of platforms in the news sphere within China's broader economic, social and technological context, as platforms like WeChat have penetrated deeply into China's society. This point will be further discussed in chapter 8 to provide an explanation for the state's tolerant attitudes towards the media power of private platforms.

¹⁴About WeChat's slogan, please see: *Ma Huateng: "connecting everything" is Tencent's slogan and ultimate objective*. Available from: <http://www.newbelink.com/article/2701.html> (Accessed 8 July 2019).

2.1.2 Three main platforms: WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao

WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao are not only among China's most popular platforms for news content, and they have also been recognized by the Chinese party-state. For example, the party-state has been driving state-controlled news organizations and party/government departments to embrace these private platforms, as shown in the so-called "Weibo, WeChat and One App" (两微一端 or WWOA) strategy. Additionally, since 2017, the semi-annual *China Statistical Report on Internet Development*, compiled by CNNIC (a research institute affiliated with the government), has included a special session on the performance of official accounts run by party and government departments on these three platforms.

WeChat: "connecting your brand to a billion users"

Launched in 2011 by Tencent, WeChat has become the most popular instant messaging and social media platform in China. In 2017, the single platform WeChat accounts for over one third (34%) of total mobile traffic in China (CAICT, 2018). By the end of 2018, WeChat's global Monthly Active Users (MAU) had reached around 1.1 billion (Tencent, 2019). On average, WeChat users spent 85.8 minutes on the platform per day in the second half of 2018, 7.3 minutes more than the previous year (QuestMobile, 2019).

While initially launched as a messaging app, WeChat now offers numerous functions: (1) *messaging functions*: WeChat chats and group chats; (2) *social media functions*: Moments (news feeds shared by friends); (3) *content publishing and subscribing*: official accounts; (4) *Top Stories* (看一看): news feeds algorithmically curated by WeChat; (5) *WeChat payment*, which includes numerous services provided by WeChat and third parties (such as paying utility bills, accessing public services, booking rail and flight tickets, making hospital appointments, and hailing a taxi); (6) *mini programs*, which are mini apps within WeChat that can be accessed without downloading them to one's devices; (7) *other services* like electronic ID and games. It is easy to see that the tentacles of WeChat have reached extremely wide in China's society. As technology writer Connie Chan (2015) comments, "While seemingly just a messaging app, WeChat is actually more of a portal, a

platform, and even a mobile operating system depending on how you look at it” (paragraph 1).

Among WeChat’s above functions, at least four of them are news-related. The first is WeChat’s Official Accounts Platform, which is at the core of its news functions. WeChat users can subscribe to official accounts and receive updates from them. All subscribed official accounts are currently grouped into one folder, called “Subscriptions”, displayed along with other chats. The content form of official accounts is similar to magazine outputs, with titles, abstracts (usually one sentence to sell the article), and cover pictures, rather than casual social media posts. As stated by WeChat, the purpose for subscription-type official accounts¹⁵ is to provide “a new means to propagate information for the media and individuals, building better communication with readers” (WeChat, n.d.-a). WeChat has specific policies regarding how many times and how many pieces of articles an official account can publish per day, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

Apart from official accounts, WeChat’s “Top Stories” is another increasingly popular news-related function. “Top Stories” has two parts: one is a news feed consisting of articles recommended by WeChat users’ friends, called “what your friends read” (朋友在看); the other, called “selections” (精选), is a news feed curated by WeChat algorithms, containing articles of current affairs, trending stories, content produced by the users’ subscribed official accounts, and stories that users’ friends have read. The third news-related function is Moments (literally called “friends’ circle” in Chinese), WeChat’s social networking function. “Moments” is similar to Facebook’s news feeds, but its content is limited to the posts of the users’ WeChat friends and is chronologically, rather than algorithmically, sorted. To add WeChat friends, one needs to get the consent of the added. That is why WeChat is deemed as a relatively closed, private, and real-world-relation-based social media platform in China. The last news-related function is WeChat’s chats and group

¹⁵WeChat Official Accounts Platform provides two types of official accounts: Subscription Account and Service Account. Of them, Service Account provides more powerful business services and user management capabilities for businesses and organizations. This project only focuses on WeChat’s Subscription accounts. See: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/loginpage?t=wxm2-login&lang=en_US&token=

chats. Within a WeChat group, which has a maximum size limit of 500,¹⁶ members are not necessarily WeChat friends.¹⁷ WeChat chats and group chats provide a relatively *private* space for news sharing and discussion. Compared to the public-square-style Weibo, WeChat groups are like private “tea houses”, which has brought challenges to the party-state’s online public opinion control (People’s Daily Online, 2017). The private feature of WeChat and the corresponding implication for China’s public opinion control will be further analysed in chapter 8.

WeChat’s different news-related functions adopt different content distribution mechanisms. Among them, WeChat official accounts mainly rely on WeChat users’ voluntary subscription and sharing; WeChat Top Stories adopts both social and algorithmic recommendations; WeChat Moments is based on WeChat users’ social relations and users’ content sharing activities; WeChat chats and group chats, as a relatively private space for news sharing and discussion, rely on users’ social relations and interactions.

Weibo: China’s online “public square”

Weibo, launched in 2009 by Sina, is China’s most popular micro-blogging site. Though usually called “China’s Twitter”, Weibo has added more functions in recent years, including sharing pictures, videos and live streams, which makes it a content platform with functions of “Twitter+ Instagram+ YouTube” (Yin, 2016). There has been much discussion about the decline of Weibo after the launch of WeChat. However, new functions and adjustment in strategies have brought Weibo new momentums since 2014. As of March 2019, Weibo’s MAU reached 465 million (Weibo, 2019).¹⁸

Unlike WeChat, where outputs of WeChat official accounts are magazine-style articles, Weibo is mainly a microblogging site. As Li (2017) notes, due

¹⁶It is reported that WeChat sets this limitation after consulting relevant experts, as a group larger than 500 members may affect the effectiveness of communication within the group. See media report from *The Paper*. Available from:

https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1894993 (Accessed 7 July 2019).

¹⁷This is because within a WeChat group, any group member can invite his/her WeChat friends to join the group, unless the group creator has required other members to seek his/her consent first.

¹⁸In comparison, as of Q1 2019, Twitter averaged at 330 million monthly active users. See: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/> (Accessed 6 August 2019)

to the 140-Chinese-character limit, the Twitter-like Weibo becomes a platform for expressions of emotions, judgments, conclusions and ideas, but not a good site for facts and investigative reports. As a response to the rise of open publishing platforms like WeChat and Toutiao, Weibo cancelled its 140-Chinese-character limit on posts and launched the “headline articles” function in 2016. These headline articles are similar to the outputs of WeChat official accounts.

Compared to WeChat’s real-world-relation networks, Weibo is much more open as a social media platform. While WeChat users’ Moments are only open to their friends, Weibo users can follow any accounts and receive their updates via news feeds. Moreover, while WeChat does not recommend any accounts or hot topics to follow for its users, Weibo algorithm actively makes such recommendations based on factors including users’ social relations and interests. That is why Weibo is widely likened to an online “public square” in China. As Jiang (2016) observes, although Weibo has lost significant user base to WeChat, it remains China’s “public forum”, “central to the publicness of Chinese social media” (p.37).

This publicness makes Weibo an important platform in relation to news and public opinion in China. Weibo’s advantage in news sphere is similar to that of Twitter, which is described as a “news ticker” and has strength in its “speed in breaking news situations” by some executives from European public service broadcasters (Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen, 2016:16). For years, Weibo has been the site where many hot topics broke and built momentum, such as the Wenzhou train collision in 2011 (People’s Daily Online, 2012). Another important news-related feature of Weibo is its various rankings, such as top searches and top topics, which are similar to the trending stories or trending topics on Twitter and Facebook. These rankings are playing an important agenda-setting role for its users in China, which will be discussed in chapter 6.

The role of Weibo “Big Vs” or “opinion leaders” (Weibo accounts with over 100,000 followers) has been widely researched in China (e.g., Wang and Xie,

2012). While Weibo opinion leaders were found to have held “considerable sway” in China’s public opinion space (Jiang, 2016:37), their role has witnessed a decline since 2013 due to two main factors. First, with the rise of WeChat as China’s most popular social media platform, many Weibo “Big Vs” (excluding entertainment and sports celebrities) have since moved to WeChat, and thus much of Weibo’s public discourses have moved to WeChat. Second, such decline is seen as a result of the government’s crack-down on Weibo “Big Vs” (Wu, Shen and Zhou, 2014). The role of opinion leaders on Weibo and WeChat will be examined in chapter 6.

Toutiao: algorithm-based news aggregator

Unlike social media platforms WeChat and Weibo, Toutiao, launched in 2012 by Bytedance,¹⁹ is China’s first and most popular algorithm-based mobile news aggregator. In recent years, both Toutiao and its parent company Bytedance have witnessed a rocketing growth. As of June 2018, Toutiao’s MAU reached 263 million. At the same time, Bytedance has become one of the world’s most valuable private tech companies. In September 2018, Bytedance was reported to be in discussions to “raise new funding that would value it at \$75 billion valuation” (in comparison, at the same period, Uber was valued at \$68 billion) (Wu and Zhou, 2018). Having made a series of acquisitions and investment in countries, including the U.S. and India, and having developed some products with global appeal like Tik Tok, Bytedance has claimed that its ultimate goal is to become the world’s “number-one” digital media destination (Knight, 2017).

Toutiao defines itself as a recommending engine based on data-mining or artificial intelligence that recommends personalized information for users, as it claims on its website (Toutiao, n.d.-a):

Toutiao is not a traditional mobile news app, and it does not have journalists and editors and does not produce its own content. At the heart of Toutiao are its algorithms, which record users’ activities on the platform and recommend content based on their interests [my

¹⁹Bytedance was established in 2012 and Toutiao was its first product.

translation].

From the above description, it is obvious that Toutiao advocates itself as an algorithm- or technology-driven company, rather than a traditional news aggregator. The description about Toutiao also shows that the algorithm of Toutiao is mainly based on users' interests. In fact, before changing its slogan to "creating values" (创造价值) in May 2018, Toutiao's slogan had been "The headline is what interests you" (你关心的才是头条).

Toutiao is structured similarly to most traditional mobile news aggregators in China. It has dozens of channels, including recommendation, hot topics, local news, video news, Q&A, and so on. Users can subscribe to the channels they choose and change the order in which they are displayed. However, content displayed on these channels is personalized, as it is recommended by the algorithms of Toutiao, rather than curated by traditional news editors (as traditional news aggregators do).

In addition to its algorithmic distribution, another crucial news-related feature of Toutiao is its Toutiaohao Platform ("hao" means account), an open publishing service similar to WeChat Official Accounts Platform. Toutiaohao platform has not only greatly expanded Toutiao's content, but also largely solved the news aggregator's copyright lawsuits with news organizations, as thousands of news organizations are now publishing within Toutiaohao platform (see more discussion in section 5.1.2).

While being hailed as an innovative platform, Toutiao has also received much criticism within China because of its user-interest-based algorithms, which have been blamed for the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours on the platform (e.g., People's Daily, 2016). The following lines of Zhang Yiming, founder and CEO of Bytedance, during an interview with *Caijing Magazine* in December 2016 drew particular criticism within China (Song, 2016):

We are not a media company, because we don't create content, neither do we voice our opinions. We are a technology company [...].

The difference is that news media have values, and they aim to educate the public [my translation].

I don't think vulgar content itself is a problem. The magazines you see at the airports and at the railway stations²⁰ target different audiences [...]. If we let the people at the airports read magazines that suit those at the railway stations, then it is the problem of our algorithms [my translation].

Zhang differentiated Toutiao from media companies on the grounds that Toutiao neither creates content nor has its own values. This issue of platform identity will be discussed in the Western context in chapter 3. In Zhang's eyes, what Toutiao did was using algorithms to match certain information with the right readers. It is easy to understand why Zhang's views were controversial and unorthodox in China's authoritarian media system, which will be discussed in the next section. It is worth noting that after receiving much criticism (e.g., from official media organizations), Zhang has since changed his stance, at least in public, on the identity and algorithms of platforms (as shown in the change of company slogan), which will be discussed in later chapters.

2.2 China's state-media relations

To examine how platforms influence China's news sphere and the party-state's public opinion control, it is necessary to understand the authoritarian nature of China's media system ("media" refers to both traditional and digital media). As Zhao (2012) argues, in relation to China's media system, the "overwhelming" role of the party-state should come first (p.144). This section examines China's state-media relations from the following aspects: (1) the state as the media role-definer; (2) the state as the media owner or controller; (3) the state as the media regulator; (4) the state and public opinion control.

2.2.1 The state as the media role-definer

²⁰In China, passengers in railway stations and airports generally belong to different social classes, given the gap between the railway tickets and air fares.

The CCP had publicly defined the role or function of Chinese news media as the “ears, eyes, throats and tongues of the Party and the people” since the 1940s (Weng, 2007). While being the mouthpieces for both the party-state and the people may seem contradictory, it is not necessarily so within China, at least rhetorically. As enshrined in the CCP’s charter, the party is “the vanguard of the Chinese working class, the Chinese people, and the Chinese nation”, and represents “the fundamental interests of the greatest possible majority of the Chinese people” [my translation] (CCP, n.d., p. 1). As Gang and Bandurski (2011) note, the CCP has resisted “a redefinition of the role of media”, which it still regards “first and foremost as promoters of the party’s agenda” (p.39).

Unlike Western media, whose responsibilities are often defined negatively: not to do certain things (such as libel, defamation, spreading rumour), Chinese media, as Zhao (2012) argues, have “a strong advocacy and social reform tradition” (p.163) and are required to “facilitate national development” (p.151). This advocacy tradition is a legacy of the Soviet media system, whose emphasis in defining the functions of mass communications was on “positively” requiring the press to do certain things, such as rallying the population in support of the leaders and their program (Siebert et al., as cited in Zhao, 2012:151). This advocacy feature of Chinese media has been reflected in the party-state’s requirement for the media (traditional or digital) to spread “positive energy” in recent years. The state’s motivation behind such requirement will be further discussed in section 7.1.2.

In contrast to Western media’s role as the “fourth estate”, with the supposed responsibility of holding the government and other estates accountable (e.g., Schultz, 1998), China’s news media are seen as the “fourth government branch” (Brady, 2008:80). Precisely because of the position of a de-facto “government branch”, Chinese news organizations enjoy “high social status and political authority” in Chinese society (Guo, 1999:32). In fact, the bosses of some major central media organizations, like the *China Media Group* (CMG)²¹, *Xinhua News Agency* and *People’s Daily*, are often vice ministers

²¹China Media Group (CMG) was established in March 2018 by merging the three former central

of the Central Publicity Department (CPD) or hold administrative ranks equal to cabinet ministers or vice ministers (Wu, 2012). There is also the so-called “revolving door” phenomenon between media and party officials in China: party officials being appointed as media managers or vice versa (Zhao, 2012:162). This special position of Chinese news organizations, especially central media giants, has given them some power when dealing with private platforms, which will be discussed in section 6.2.

However, Chinese news media are not “merely the public relations wing” of the CCP (Hadland, 2015:126), but also play a watchdog or “media supervision” (媒体监督) role through investigative or critical reporting (e.g., Guo, 1999; Lorentzen, 2014; Repnikova, 2017; Tong and Sparks, 2009; Zhao, 2000). While “criticizing the central role of the party is out of the question” (Lorentzen, 2014: 411), Chinese media and journalists have long been “dancing between the party line and the bottom line” (Zhao, 1998) and playing the “cat and mouse” game with the party-state (Gang and Bandurski, 2001:54). However, it must be pointed out that compared to their propaganda role, this watchdog role is relatively limited, and its boundary is set by the party-state. As Repnikova (2017) rightly notes, although Chinese critical journalists are “carrying out enduring battles within the system” (p.4), the relationships between the state and critical journalist are “a fluid, state-dominated partnership” (p.10).

The watchdog role of Chinese news media is linked to the so-called “journalistic professionalism”, of which “serving the people” and “objectivity” (meaning journalists should stay neutral in reporting, rather than voice their own opinions) are the two key elements (e.g., Guo, 1999; Li and Dai, 2008; Zhao, 2012). Drawing on many scholars (e.g., Lu and Pan, 2002; Schroeder, 2018; Zhao, 2012), there are three main factors or sources for the development of Chinese journalistic professionalism: (1) the market-oriented media commercialization (some scholars use “media marketization”) since

broadcasters: *China Central Television, China Radio International, and China National Radio*. CMG is the English translation of its domestic Chinese name (中央广播电视总台). Outside China, CMG is also called *Voice of China*.

the late 1970s, when China began its reform and opening policy; (2) Western (especially American) liberal news values like objectivity; (3) China's historical Confucius culture, in which intellectuals acting as the conscience of society and voice of the people. In recent years, there has been discussion that journalism is in crisis and journalistic professionalism has been questioned in China (e.g., Pan and Lu, 2017). Section 6.1 will examine how and why platforms have caused such concerns.

Here, China's media commercialization, a widely researched topic (e.g., Chan, 1993; Gang and Bandurski, 2011; Hadland and Zhang, 2012; Ma, 2000; Pan, 1997; Stockmann, 2013; Wu, 2000; Zhao, 2004), is worth more discussion. This is because media commercialization not only has a profound impact on the functions of Chinese news media, but also can be compared to the rise of platforms in a number of ways (see later chapters), including the impact of commercial interests on the party-state's public opinion control. Since 1978, the over-burdened party-state actively pushed media organizations to the market, by reducing direct subsidies and providing financial incentives (e.g., Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2004). As a result, Chinese news media have been transformed from non-profit propaganda units to mostly advertisement-funded and market-driven media businesses (Zhao, 2004), and they now have "two masters—the party and the public" (Gang and Bandurski, 2011:41).

At the same time, media commercialization has been criticized for having allowed greater interference of commercial interests in media practices, leading to "bottom-line thinking and sensationalism" (Gang and Bandurski, 2011: 44). As Zhang and Deng (2013) observe, when most news media organizations become for-profit enterprises, they tend to operate according to capital logic: pursuing profits rather than public interest. As for the implication of media commercialization for the party-state's public opinion control, many scholars have concluded that it has solidified the party-state's control (e.g., Hadland and Zhang, 2012; Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2004). The main reasons include: (1) although media commercialization has brought certain degree of autonomy to news media, such autonomy is mainly limited

to non-political areas (e.g., Ma, 2000; Zhao, 2004); (2) commercialized news media enjoy more credibility, and thus are conducive for the party-state's control of public opinion (e.g., Stockmann, 2013).

2.2.2 The state as the media owner and/or controller

Media ownership has been a crucial part of the Chinese party-state's media control. Although the party-state has loosened the ownership control over some media areas, such as allowing private and foreign capital to hold controlling shares in film and television entertainment production, media commercialization has not changed the ownership of Chinese news outlets, which are still owned or controlled (meaning holding controlling shares) by the party-state (Zhao, 2004; 2012). For example, although *Xinhuanet* went publicly traded in 2016, *Xinhua News Agency* still holds over 80 percent of the shares of the official news website (Liu, 2016). Through such an arrangement: opening up the "peripheral" media areas and controlling the core media areas (i.e., news outlets), the party-state still retains "strategic control" over China's media system (Zhao, 2012:153).

However, in recent years, as private Internet companies have been actively involved in investing in news outlets, a mixed ownership of Chinese news outlets has been increasingly witnessed (Guo, 2017; Li, 2017a; Zhang and Li, 2018). A prominent example is the Internet giant Alibaba, which has invested in, acquired, or jointly launched many news outlets in recent years, including: holding a 30% share of *Yicai* (a leading financial news outlet); jointly launching *Cover Media* with *Sichuan Daily* (a provincial party newspaper); jointly launching *Wujie* with SEEC Media Group and the Cyberspace Administration of Xinjiang (the Internet regulator in Xinjiang); and acquiring *South China Morning Post* (an influential English-language newspaper based in Hong Kong) (Guo, 2017). Another example is the launching of *Beijing Hour* (a news platform focusing on news videos) jointly by *Beijing TV* and Qihu 360 (a major private Internet company) in 2016. Qihu 360 is the controlling stakeholder of *Beijing Hour* (with 60% share) and the chairman is also from Qihu, the first case in China with a private company holding over 50% share of a news outlet (Guo and Hu, 2017). Although the *Beijing Hour*

case may only be an experiment of the party-state, it signals that the importance of strict ownership control over news outlets may be in relative decline in a changing media environment.

While Chinese news outlets are still largely owned or controlled by the party-state, the digital media market has witnessed a very different picture. Private capital entered China's online news provision market in the late 1990s, when Internet start-ups (e.g., Sina, Sohu and Netease) were allowed to aggregate news from news organizations. In December 2000, Sina and Sohu were issued a formal license for re-publishing news, becoming the first batch of private Internet companies which have obtained such a license (Min, 2014). Since then, China's digital media market has been increasingly dominated by private Internet companies. As discussed in section 2.1, almost all Chinese popular platforms are owned by private Internet companies (especially Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu, and Bytedance). How the party-state responds to the private ownership of platforms will be discussed in chapter 7.

It is important to note that, although China's digital media market is increasingly dominated by private Internet companies, the party-state still maintains strict control over China's information infrastructure. At the national level, only a number of government-approved institutions and state-owned companies (such as the state-owned telecommunication giants China Telecom, China mobile, and China Unicom; the Education Ministry) are permitted to establish and manage an Internet Interconnecting Network or "backbone network" (骨干网).²² All private Internet service providers at the next tier, including China's Internet giants such as Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu, rent equipment from and are licensed through one of these "backbone networks", and are required to "install filters to block away undesirable content" (Liang and Lu, 2010:106). That is to say, the party-state is able to exert control over private platforms at the infrastructural level, given that it can have the Internet connections of private platforms cut-off in extreme situations.

²²These are the information infrastructure that connects servers across Chinese provinces and between China and the outside world. See: <https://www.yicai.com/news/100115374.html> (Accessed 7 July 2019).

2.2.3 The state as the media and Internet regulator

Unlike regulatory agencies in many Western democracies, which “typically operate at arm’s length from the government”, China’s media regulators are government departments subject to the directives of the Publicity Department (PD)²³ of the CCP (Zhao, 2012:154). The PDs at various levels (from central to local) are at the heart of China’s media and public opinion control system, which have the responsibility of guiding and planning China’s ideology-relevant work and have leadership relations with a number of institutions relevant to propaganda work (e.g., Brady, 2008; Stockmann, 2013).

China’s media regulatory system is structured according to different types of media (traditional or digital media; state-owned or privately owned) and different administration levels (central, provincial, city, and county). All traditional news units are required to have a sponsor-unit (e.g., Hassid, 2008; Lorentzen, 2014; Zhao, 2012), such as party or government departments, state-owned enterprises, social organizations, and official media organizations (Wu, 2000). These sponsor-units retain “ultimate responsibility” over the content published by their affiliated news outlets and thus have a strong “incentive” to ensure them to comply with government and party directives (Hassid, 2008:419). Where the control is insufficient, the CCP can suspend or close down the relevant media outlets (Lorentzen, 2014:410). Obviously, such a sponsor-unit system is crucial for the party-state to exercise effective control over traditional media outlets.

In contrast, Internet news providers do not necessarily need a sponsor-unit, making it possible for private companies to enter the online news market. However, private capital is not allowed to “gather” and “produce” original news in key areas (i.e., public affairs such as politics, economy, military, and foreign affairs, and breaking social incidents), but only “re-publish” news from designated news organizations (mainly central and provincial news

²³“Propaganda Department” is the literal translation of its Chinese name, although the department’s current official English translation is “Publicity Department”, as “propaganda” is a word with a negative meaning in most of the world.

media) (CAC, 2017a). How the party-state has been regulating private platforms will be discussed in chapter 7 in more detail.

Traditional media and online news providers have different media regulators in China. In March 2018, as part of China's party and state institutional reform, China's traditional media regulatory framework underwent an overhaul. The regulatory responsibilities of the former State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV (SAPPRFT) were divided into two parts: one part within the regulatory domain of the current TV and Radio regulator SART and the other part under the direct supervision of the CPD (CGTN, 2018). Meanwhile, the former three central broadcasters, which were regulated by the SAPPRFT, were restructured to form a single national broadcaster CMG and also placed under the direct supervision of the CPD. Such a move is seen as "a sign of increasing media control and scrutiny of news and online content" by the party-state, as a *Guardian* report notes (Kuo, 2018).

China's online content regulatory system has also witnessed great adjustment in recent years. In a speech in November 2013, President Xi Jinping emphasized that China's Internet regulation "has lagged far behind the quick changes" and had "obvious flaws" including multi-headed oversight and low efficiency (Mozur, 2013). As a response, China announced in 2014 the establishment of the highest-level Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group (renamed as Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, or CCAC, in March 2018), which is headed by President Xi himself and is designed to "lead and coordinate" Internet security and informatization work among different sectors (Xinhua, 2014). Here, "informatization" refers to the process of advancing from the industrial society to the information society, which is characterized by "digitization, networking and smartification" (CCP Central Committee General Office, 2016). At the same time, the former Internet content regulator State Internet Information Office (SIIO) was renamed as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). Compared to its predecessor SIIO, a government institution under State Council (China's cabinet), the CAC, also the standing office of

the CCAC, is both a government and a CCP *central* institution. Thus, the CAC has greater authority than its predecessor, and it can coordinate Internet content regulation across different government departments (such as the Cultural Ministry and the broadcasting regulator SART) that have Internet regulation authority over specific content areas.²⁴ The establishment of the CCAC and the CAC has demonstrated the determination of the party-state to strengthen Internet regulation in a new media environment, especially with the rise of digital media platforms.

Another feature of China's media regulatory framework is its multi-level structure. As Stockmann (2013) observes, the Chinese state comprises territorial divisions at the central (or national), province, city, county, township and village levels; the party and government units at the national level replicate themselves in a "vertical chain" through lower levels of institutions; Chinese newspapers (in fact, other types of media outlets as well) are "integrated into this broader political structure" (p.52).²⁵ In general, the media at the provincial and local levels enjoy more autonomy than those at the central level (Ma, 2000). This is because, in comparison with the central government, China's local authorities are "mainly concerned with economic development, not ideological correctness" (Wu and Zheng, 1995, cited in Wu, 2000: 62-63). This multi-level structure is important in understanding China's within-media power structure. Major central news outlets such as *Xinhua News Agency* hold key information-releasing power (e.g., Lin, Chang and Zhang, 2015), and are used by the party-state to enforce a "unified propaganda line" throughout the Chinese media: for certain official events and announcements, all Chinese media (traditional and digital) must carry only the *Xinhua* reports (Scotton and Hachten, 2010:116). Moreover, although this multi-level structure is mainly related to traditional media, as digital media's circulation or broadcasting scope is naturally national (even global), China still maintains this "territorial regulation" principle across all types of media (CAC, 2016a). That is why Tencent (headquartered in

²⁴This is related to the features of China's political system: central institutions under the CCP central committee have higher authority than state institutions, as the state council is under the leadership of the CCP.

²⁵It is worth noting that there are four levels of media, rather than six levels, as township- or village-level media do not exist in China. The media regulators also have four levels of institutions.

Guangdong province) is under the regulatory authority of Cyberspace Administration of Guangdong Province.

2.2.4 The state and online public opinion control

As mentioned in section 1.3, China's public opinion control involves two forms of control: public opinion guidance (the softer form) and public opinion supervision and management (the harder form). Public opinion guidance, a concept raised by the former President Jiang Zemin (in power from 1989-2002) after Beijing's 1989 political turmoil, has been the centerpiece of the party-state's ideology-related work (Ding, 2016). Chinese top leadership has repeatedly emphasized the crucial importance of correct public opinion guidance. For example, President Jiang emphasized that correct public opinion guidance was the "blessings" for the party and the people, and wrong guidance the "disaster" for the party and the people; Jiang's successor President Hu Jintao (in power from 2002-2012) acknowledged that public opinion guidance concerned the "ruling capability" of the CCP (Ding, 2016). Similarly, President Xi Jinping (in power since 2012) has emphasized that public opinion guidance concerns "the banner and the road" (meaning China's socialism system) and "the fate of the party and the state" (People's Daily Online, 2018a).

For the CCP, the purpose of public opinion guidance is to guarantee the CCP's legitimacy to stay in power (e.g., Brady, 2008; Stockmann, 2013; Walker and Orttung, 2014). As the famous line of Chinese ancient philosopher Confucius in the *Analects* states: "Without legitimacy, words are invalid" (名不正则言不顺). This is the main rationale for the Chinese party-state's placing so much emphasis on public opinion guidance, rather than more coercive methods (such as sacking or arresting journalists and editors), in controlling public opinion, given that resorting more to the former improves the CCP's legitimacy of staying in power (Stockmann, 2013).

To guide public opinion effectively, the party-state has instructed the media to respect and follow the inherent rules of online communication, and grasp the timing, extent, and effectiveness of news reporting (People's Daily Online,

2018a). Moreover, a well-known tactic of the party-state in guiding public opinion is the hiring of online moderators, or the so-called “Fifty Cent Party” members, to express pro-regime views online. The number of “Fifty Cent Party” members employed by the central government is estimated at 250,000-300,000 (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013).

In addition to guiding public opinion, the Chinese party-state also resorts to media and Internet regulators to exercise more coercive methods (such as censorship and punishment) to control public opinion. It is widely known that the Chinese party-state has established an unprecedented online content censoring apparatus in terms of its size and sophistication (King et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2009). Through empirical studies, scholars have been able to reveal some important features of China’s domestic content censorship. For example, by systematically testing Chinese blog service providers, MacKinnon (2009) finds that China’s domestic censorship is decentralized with wide variation among blogging sites; and a great deal of politically sensitive material survives in the Chinese blogosphere. Similarly, Bamman, O'Connor and Smith (2012) found that while some politically sensitive terms (such as the name of political dissident Liu Xiaobo) whose presence in a message leads to much higher rates of deletion, the message deletion rate in the outlying provinces such as Tibet and Qinghai is much higher than that of other provinces. A reasonable guess for such a geo-divergence is that there exist separatist movements in these provinces. Moreover, based on analysis of a large scale data sample,²⁶ King et al. (2013) arrive at the conclusion that, contrary to previous understanding, posts with negative criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored; instead, China’s censorship programme aims at “curtailing collective action” by silencing comments that may spur social mobilization (p.326).

In explaining why China’s censoring apparatus tolerates certain content and deletes others, Lorentzen (2014) presents a “strategic censorship” model. This model shows that under some conditions, China optimally permits

²⁶According to King et al. (2013), they collected millions of social media posts originating from nearly 1,400 different social media services all over China.

investigative reporting on lower-level officials, adjusting how much reporting is allowed depending on the level of underlying social tensions. Therefore, as Lorentzen argues, “this strategy yields many of the benefits of free media without risking overthrow” (2014: 402). Similarly, deLisle, Goldstein and Yang (2016) argue that tolerating some online criticism, such as exposure of abuse of power, corruption and incidents, actually serves the party-state’s interest. This is because such expressions can provide a “steam valve” for public anger and bring “potentially stability-threatening problems” to the attention of the authorities who can then respond to them (p.2). This is supported by some other scholars’ observation that, despite its authoritarian nature, the Chinese state has shown considerable responsiveness to online public opinion (e.g., Hassid, 2015; Su and Meng, 2016). However, such responsiveness of the Chinese government at various levels is often selective, and requests from local citizens, expressed collectively, and closely related to economic growth are more likely to be responded to (Su and Meng, 2016). In other words, the party-state is more responsive to online opinions related to collective actions and economic issues than to other issues (such as political rights).

In addition to content censorship, self-censorship is a very important part of the party-state’s public opinion control. Being afraid of punishment including arrest, Chinese media professionals, websites and even bloggers all carry out active self-censorship (e.g., Wang and Hong, 2010). For example, Tai (2009) finds that most Chinese bloggers “voluntarily shied away from politically sensitive and subversive issues and topics [...] as a strategy of self-survival” (p. 76). As Hadland (2015) observes, censorship and self-censorship are complementary forces for the Chinese party-state to establish political control; compared to censorship, which is “formal, overt, coercive and institutionalized”, self-censorship is “informal, voluntary and covert, but also institutionalized” (p.129).

Given that self-censorship has been so embedded in the newsrooms, Chinese journalists and editors often know where the reporting “red lines” or “boundary” is. As Brady (2008) notes, almost all journalists in China

understand that investigative reports should “only target low level officials and solvable problems” (p.80). This is similar to deLisle et al. (2016)’s observation: criticism of officials only targets those below the very top leadership and criticism of policies avoids certain controversial areas. The “red lines” regarding online content governance will be discussed in section 7.1.2.

There exist debates as to whether the Internet, especially social media, has enhanced or weakened the capability of authoritarian regimes’ media control. One side of the debate is the argument that the Internet will ultimately disrupt the ability of authoritarian regimes to maintain power, as it is much more difficult to control the Internet because of its interactivity, fragmentation, low threshold for publishing and so on (e.g., Earl and Kimport, 2011). The other side of the debates, often citing China as a successful example in controlling the risks posed by the Internet, argues that most authoritarian regimes have used technologies and traditional forms of repression (e.g., arrests) to counter the threat of new media (e.g., MacKinnon, 2008, 2010). deLisle et al. (2016) note that, in spite of posing some challenges to the regime, the Internet provides the party-state “novel channels” to shape public opinion and thus serve as “a ready means” for the authorities to monitor public opinion and target dissents and organized opposition (p.2). This thesis will examine whether this observation is true in the platform era.

Chapter conclusion

This contextual chapter has examined the features of China’s digital media platforms and China’s state-platform relations. Regarding the features of Chinese platforms, it has shown that there are some common characteristics: first, almost all major platforms are owned by domestic private Internet companies; second, all major platforms provide open publishing space for a wide variety of news producers, and they all adopt, more or less, algorithms in their content distribution. While sharing these common features, China’s three main platforms, WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao, are distinctively different from each other: WeChat is a relatively closed and private space; Weibo has been likened to China’s “online public square”; Toutiao is China’s most

representative platform which advocates and relies on algorithms in its operation. These features of Chinese platforms have significant implications for China's public opinion control, which will be discussed in later chapters.

Regarding China's state-media relations, this chapter has shown that the dominance of the state is the fundamental feature of this authoritarian media system. In China, the party-state is the definer of the role of Chinese media, the owner or controller of news organizations and information infrastructure, the media/Internet regulator, and it employs complex methods (both soft and hard) to control public opinion. In examining the features of China's media system, this chapter has included both traditional media and digital media. This is because both of them are important in China's news sphere and media power structure. Moreover, in analyzing the impact of platforms on China's news sphere and public opinion control, previous studies on China's traditional media are still relevant. For example, the impact of China's media commercialization on the state's public opinion control can be likened to that of private platforms, which will be discussed in later chapters.

Chapter 3: Media power and platform-era Internet governance

Introduction

This chapter serves three main purposes. Firstly, it provides a theoretical framework for the whole thesis by reviewing relevant literature around concepts such as media power, gatekeeping power and governance power. Secondly, by reviewing literature on discussions and debates around the media power of platforms, regulation of platforms, and Internet governance in the platform era, this chapter connects my research with the wider context concerning the role and power of platforms in the news sphere. Thirdly, while reviewing the existing literature, it identifies some research gaps and indicates where this project can make its contributions.

In conducting the literature review, I have included literature that concerns both Western and Chinese platforms and written both in the English and Chinese languages. This approach can be seen as a contribution of this review, as it may reveal some similarities and differences between Chinese and Western platforms. However, most literature reviewed in this chapter is set in the Western contexts, due to the fact that relevant research set in China's context has just started to emerge and is still much needed. As for the outline of this chapter, first, it will review relevant literature around the concept of media power. Then, it will focus on the relevant literature discussing the media power of platforms—both gatekeeping power and governance power. Last, it will concentrate on the literature concerning current debates around platform regulation and the new Internet governance approach in the platform era.

3.1 Media power: a contested concept

Media power is usually a taken-for-granted but actually contested concept. As Couldry and Curran (2003) note: “To say that ‘the media are powerful’ is a cliché, yet to ask in what media power consists is to open a riddle” (p.3). One reason for such a “riddle” is that when people are talking about “media power”, they may be referring to very different things. As Freedman (2015)

asks:

Does it express the economic impact of the [media] industry, the political influence of particular “media moguls,” or the media’s capacity to modify attitudes and beliefs? Does it refer to the ability of media to provide state or corporate actors with a valuable tool to assert their own dominance or to the diffusion of symbolic resources? (p. 273)

In the above quotation, Freedman has tapped into several dimensions of media power, including the economic power of the media industry, political influence of media moguls, the mind-shaping power on media audiences, and as a valuable tool for other actors to spread their messages. Therefore, it is important and necessary to clarify how media power is understood and defined in this thesis.

In terms of defining media power, there exist at least two very different perspectives: first, media power can be understood as “the influence of the media on their audiences”; second, media power can be discussed “within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society” (Van Dijk, 1995:9). That is, the first perspective focuses on the power of media content, while the second focuses on the power of the media as an institution in relation to other social institutions. Scholars who adopt the first perspective tend to define media power as a “symbolic” power, while scholars who take the second path incline to define it as a “relational” power. In this thesis, media power is understood as both a symbolic and a relational power, as it will conduct analysis from both perspectives. It is also necessary to clarify that in this thesis, “media” is restricted to news-related media, including traditional and digital media.

3.1.1 Media power as symbolic power

Thompson (1995), among others, has distinguished four kinds of power: economic, political, coercive and symbolic power. Among them, “symbolic power” is exercised “by means of the production and transmission of

symbolic forms” (pp.13-17). Given that media content is a type of symbolic forms, media power is “generally symbolic and persuasive, in the sense that the media primarily have the potential to control to some extent the minds of readers or viewers, but not directly their actions” (Van Dijk, 1995:10). Here, the potential, or the assumed capability, of the media to control or shape the minds of their audiences is what the symbolic power of the media means.

This mind-shaping or mind-controlling power of the media is often linked to another concept: “ideology”, which is especially the case in China where news media are an important “ideology battlefield” (Xia, 2016). While being seen as one of the “most contested” concepts (Giddens, 1991:21), ideology, in the broadest sense, refers to “a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson and Tedin, 2015:70). Departing from this broadest sense of “ideology”, no news content is ideology-free, since the persons or institutions producing it have their own beliefs. As Fowler (2013) argues, news is socially constructed; news content is not “facts” about the world, but in a very general sense “beliefs”, “values”, “propositions”, or “ideology” (pp.1-4). The reason why the Chinese party-state has been attaching great importance to the production of news (see section 2.2) is that news content is assumed to have symbolic power—the potential to shape or control the public’s minds—and thus concerns the CCP’s ideology control.

Another relevant concept, hegemony, has also been linked to the symbolic power of the media. According to Gramsci (1971), “Hegemony operates at the level of *common sense* in the assumptions we make about social life and on the terrain of things that we accept as *natural*” (cited in Croteau, Hoynews and Milan, 2012: 159-160, emphasis added). In other words, Gramscian hegemony happens when we accept something as “common sense” or “natural” and without any questioning, doubting or inner conflicts. As Van Dijk (1995) argues, the media’s mind control is “particularly effective” when audiences “change their minds of their own free will, as when they accept news reports as true or journalistic opinions as legitimate or correct” (p.11). That is, the symbolic power of the media is most powerful when audiences

believe certain news reports without any questioning—an example of when Gramscian hegemony is achieved.

Lukes' third-dimensional power echoes the Gramscian concept of hegemony (Clegg, 1989:4). Lukes (2005) argues that power is “at its most effective when least observable” (p.1). What he has termed as the “third-dimensional” view of power is crystalized in the below lines:

Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes, 2005:28)

According to Lukes, the “least observable” power is actually the “supreme” power, as it can shape “perceptions, cognitions and preferences” in a way most preferable to those who exercise such power. This is close to the hypothesis Castells (2009) proposed, in his book *Communication Power*, which states that “*the most fundamental form of power* lies in the ability to shape the human mind. The way we feel and think determines the way we act” (p.3, emphasis added). While people may disagree with such arguments of Lukes and Castells, the CCP does attach crucial importance to ideology-related issues. As Brady (2008) observes, “propaganda and thought work” is “the very life blood of the Party-State, one of the key means for guaranteeing the CCP’s ongoing legitimacy and hold on power” (p.1). This is also why the CCP has been largely relying on public opinion guidance, rather than mainly resorting to coercive power in order to stay in power (see section 2.2.4).

However, the symbolic power of the media is not without resistance, as power always involves “counter-power” (Castells, 2010:3). Many scholars have emphasized the rejection, disbelief, criticism, skepticism, or other forms of resistance from news audiences to the desired lines of media content (e.g.,

Tsfati and Cappella, 2003; Van Dijk, 1995). Prior study has long suggested that, due to factors like individual predispositions and selective perception processes, media content often *reinforces* existing attitudes of the audiences rather than *changes* them (Klapper, 1960). While the media may not always be effective in influencing the minds of their audiences or consumers, two media effects theories focusing on the influence of the media on public opinion—agenda-setting and framing—have been widely researched and well-established. Both of them have been linked to the CCP’s public opinion guidance (e.g., Chen, 2018b).

Agenda-setting is “the ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda (McCombs and Reynolds, 2009:1), which is “the initial stage in the formation of public opinion” (McCombs, 2018:2). As Cohen (1963) famously argues, the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling [people] what to think *about*” (p.13, emphasis in original). While agenda-setting studies have sought systematically to research the effects of traditional mass media on their audiences (Meraz, 2009), many studies have explored the agenda-setting effect in a new media landscape. It has been well established that the agenda-setting power is no longer only in the hands of mass media but is distributed among more actors, including prominent independent bloggers and commentators and platforms like Twitter and Weibo (e.g., Meraz, 2009; Rogstad, 2016; Wu et al., 2013). For instance, Rogstad (2016) finds out that Twitter does not just re-hash what are salient in mainstream media, but also gives attention to issues (e.g., environment challenges) that are overlooked by them, suggesting that Twitter itself is an agenda-setter.

Framing is another media effects theory that is closely linked to public opinion. To frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient”, and in such a way to promote a particular “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993:52). Frames are effective in evoking “similar thoughts and feelings” in large proportions of the audience by finding “cultural resonance” (Entman, 2004:6). However, as

Erikson and Tedin (2015) note, frames left unchallenged can powerfully shape public opinion, but once they are challenged by counter-frames, their initial effect can be greatly undermined (p. 237).

3.1.2 Media power as relational power

When focusing on the power of media institutions in relation to other social actors, rather than the power of media content on audiences, media power is often defined as a relational power. Drawing on Castells (2009), Freedman (2015) defines media power as “the relationships [...] between actors [...] that organize the allocation of the symbolic resources necessary to structure our knowledge about [...] the world around us” (p. 274). That is to say, as a relational power, media power can be understood as the power relations between different actors (such as the media organizations, the state, and others) regarding the allocation of “symbolic resources”. Given that this thesis examines the *structural changes* brought by Chinese platforms, understanding media power as a relational power is particularly relevant.

There exist debates around whether or not the media themselves are powerful. As Couldry and Curran (2003) note, media power faces two ways. From one direction, media power points to how other powerful forces use the media to “wage their battles for certain interests”; thus, “media power disappears; it is merely the door through which the contestants for power pass en route to battle” (p.3). That is to say, the media just play the “mediating” role among powerful forces. From the second direction, media power is the “direct control over the means of media production” (p.4), and the media are thus powerful in their own right. Castells (2010) is among those who take the first direction. In his words, “the media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided” (pp. 4-5). In contrast, scholars who adopt the second direction argue that the media are not just the battlefields for power, but are themselves powerful (e.g., Couldry and Curran, 2003; Schultz, 1998), because “the power to control the flow of information is a major lever in the control of society” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009:3). Schultz (1998) argues that the news media have become “an industry prepared to exercise and pursue self-interested commercial, political and

cultural agendas” and thus become a source of “real and significant power and influence” (p.1). This thesis takes the second direction that the media are themselves a powerful actor, given that the media (here, referring to both traditional and digital media) have their own interests (such as making profits) and some (such as partisan media) even have their own political agendas, as well as the capacity of influencing the allocation of symbolic resources. As for digital media platforms, it is increasingly well-accepted that platforms are not merely intermediaries, but central points of control on the Internet (e.g., DeNardis and Hackl, 2015; Gillespie, 2018b). Therefore, platforms are not only battlefields for other actors to contend for power, but themselves are powerful media actor.

Gatekeeping is a long-established theory in journalism and communication studies, focusing on the role of media organizations and media professionals. White (1950)’s seminal research focused on the decisions of individual gatekeepers, defining gatekeeping as a selection process where gatekeepers pick which news items to run in the media. But gatekeeping involves more than individual gatekeepers and is more than a selection process. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) redefine gatekeeping as the process through which events are covered by the “mass media” (p.1), explaining “how different elements get turned into news and how that news is framed, emphasized, placed, and promoted” (Vos, 2015:4). It is worth noting that, here, “mass media” refer to any media with big audiences, and thus the Internet is considered as a type of mass media (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Shoemaker and Riccio (2015) further argue that the Internet has made the globe a field against which the gatekeeping web of information must be understood.

While gatekeeping theory has been continuously evolving, the five-level forces model, first summarized by Shoemaker (1991) in explaining the factors that influence how media messages turn out the way they do, seems still to be relevant (Vos, 2015). These five levels include: (1) *The individual level* examines the influence of individual gatekeepers (e.g., the demographic profiles and cognitive characteristics of gatekeepers); (2) *The routines level* looks at those patterned and routinized practices of media workers (e.g., time

constraints, reporting and verification procedures); (3) *The organizational level* refers to internal factors that vary by news-related organizations (e.g., ownership structure and organizational culture); (4) *The social institutional level* focuses on the exogenous social institutions (e.g., market forces, governments, interest groups, advertisers); (5) *The social system level* explores the impact of values, ideology and culture (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Vos, 2015). While technology (e.g., algorithm) has been an increasingly important factor in influencing whether certain news and information can reach news consumers, it is not sufficiently addressed in this five-level analysis model, which will be further discussed in the next section in relation to platform gatekeeping.

In a new media environment, where space and media outlets are no longer scarce and news production is no longer unidirectional, much of what journalism scholars thought they knew about gatekeeping has been called into question (Vos, 2015). However, many scholars maintain that gatekeeping theory is still relevant and viable in today's news environment, because: (1) the theory itself has been evolving (e.g., incorporating the Internet and social media into its theory); (2) traditional gatekeeping is still working; (3) new media, including social media like Facebook, are also gatekeepers (e.g., Shoemaker and Riccio, 2015; Vos, 2015). Drawing on scholars like Barzilai-Nahon (2008), the next section will redefine gatekeeping in the platform era.

In addition to the power of media institutions, the state is also an important actor in relation to media power. In Western democracies, the state is presumed not to intervene in the public sphere on behalf of its own interests to avoid inducing a legitimation crisis (Castells, 2009). In their comparative studies on the media systems of eighteen European and North American countries, Hallin and Mancini (2004) discuss the role of the state in shaping media as the last variable in their four-variable model and discuss it in terms of ownership, funding, and regulation. As Zhao (2012) points out, because Hallin and Mancini frame the role of the state in terms of "intervention", they have presumed a natural state before the state's intervention and thus excluded a potential role of the state in the initial formation of the media

systems (p.150). In China, the role of the state within the media system is dramatically different, as discussed in section 2.2.

Moreover, political, cultural and economic elites (such as politicians, scholars, media owners, and business leaders) have been found to be the dominant media sources in Western democracies, and thus hold certain degree of media power. As Van Dijk (1995) notes, power is generally based on “special access to valued social resources” including the media; compared to elite groups, ordinary people generally have no direct influence on news content, nor are they usually the major objects of news reports (p.11). Similarly, many other scholars have concluded that the elites, especially the officials or political elites, are the dominant news sources (e.g., Schudson, 2010).

The media power of the above-discussed elites is closely connected to online opinion leaders in China’s context, as surveys have shown that Chinese online opinion leaders are largely traditional elites such as media professionals, academics and business leaders (see section 6.1.2). Many studies on opinion leaders in the Chinese language (e.g., Wang and Xie, 2012; Wu et al., 2014) have traced the origin of this term back to Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948). In their book, *The People’s Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al. proposed a “two-step flow of communication” hypothesis: “Ideas often flow from the radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population” (1948: 151). Although today’s media environment is very different from that in the 1940s, the “two-step flow of communication” model is still very relevant in China (People’s Daily Online, 2013). In other words, many news consumers rely on the analysis and interpretations of opinion leaders in understanding certain events and issues. This is why self-media opinion leaders are an important actor in China’s media power structure (see section 6.1.2).

Other actors such as media owners and advertisers are also identified as having the potential to influence news production. Based on their observation of U.S. news environment, Herman and Chomsky (1988) proposed a “propaganda model”. The model identified five factors (ownership,

advertising, sourcing, flak, and a dominant central ideology), working as “filters” through which information must pass to become news in the media. Herman himself claimed that the model was commonly excluded from mainstream debates on media bias, because it “challenges basic premises and suggest that the media serve antidemocratic ends” (2000:101). Some factors identified in this model, such as media ownership, advertisers, and a dominant ideology (in China’s case, the CCP’s ideology), are useful in understanding media power in China. While the power of advertisers (or investors) is mainly beyond the focus of this project, it will be briefly discussed in chapter 6 as the “power of capital” over news producers. How the party-state has been dealt with the private ownership of platforms will be discussed in chapter 7.

3.2 Media power of platforms

This section reviews relevant literature concerning the media power of platforms. It is widely acknowledged that digital media platforms have become the new gatekeepers of information in today’s media environment (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Helberger et al., 2015; Rosen, 2008; Tufekci, 2015; Vos, 2015). At the same time, the governance power of platforms has drawn increasing attention and led to the discussion of online content or speech being privately governed (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Crawford and Gillespie, 2014; DeNardis and Hackl, 2015; Gillespie, 2017a; Hintz, 2014; Wagner, 2013). While gatekeeping power in the media sphere is traditionally linked to media organizations and media professionals (e.g., Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009); governance power is traditionally associated with national governments and other regulatory bodies (e.g., DeNardis, 2009; Goldsmith and Wu, 2006). Today’s platforms have power in both domains and become both the gatekeepers and governors of online news and information. This section will review relevant literature concerning the gatekeeping power and governance power of platforms respectively.

3.2.1 Gatekeeping power of platforms

As discussed in section 3.1.2, gatekeeping is a long-established theory in journalism and media studies. A key difference between the gatekeeping role of traditional media and platforms is that the mechanisms of platform

gatekeeping (such as algorithms and technical designs) are very different from that of media professionals. This sub-section will review literature concerning the gatekeeping power of platforms, discussing both algorithmic and non-algorithmic gatekeeping and the implications for news processes. Given that academic research about the gatekeeping role of Chinese platforms is still much needed, this sub-section only focuses on literature set in the Western context. How Chinese platforms are influencing news processes through their gatekeeping role will be examined in chapter 5.

Redefining gatekeeping in the platform era

Adapting gatekeeping theory in a networked environment, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) defines “network gatekeeping” as “the process of controlling information as it moves through a gate”, and gatekeeping activities including, among others: “selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion of information” (p.1496). That is to say, in a networked environment, “selection” is only one of the many information controlling activities. Thus, such an approach in defining gatekeeping differs greatly from the traditional gatekeeping theory, which defines gatekeeping mainly as a selection process (as discussed in section 3.1.2)

Barzilai-Nahon (2008) has also identified a series of gatekeeping mechanisms in a networked environment. These mechanisms mainly include: channeling (e.g., searching), censorship (e.g., filtering, blocking, and deletion of information), security (e.g., authentication controls), value adding (e.g., personalization), infrastructure (e.g., network access and network configuration), editorial control (e.g., traditional content control) and regulation (e.g., state regulations). It is easy to see that some gatekeeping mechanisms (such as regulation) identified by Barzilai-Nahon are traditionally associated with regulatory bodies, and some (such as personalization) are unique to platforms.

Although Barzilai-Nahon’s network gatekeeping theory does not focus on the role of digital media platforms, her approach in defining gatekeeping and

identifying gatekeeping mechanisms is still very useful for this project. As Vos (2015) notes, compared to traditional gatekeeping models, the approach of Barzilai-Nahon (2008) is “more extensive in defining gatekeeping activities” (p.13). However, Barzilai-Nahon’s network gatekeeping theory does not differentiate the activities and mechanisms of governance from those of gatekeeping. In this project, it is necessary to make such a differentiation. This is not only because gatekeeping power and governance power are two different types of power from a traditional perspective, but also because they are often discussed separately by scholars in relevant areas. Media scholars (e.g., Helberger et al., 2015; Vos, 2015) usually focus on the gatekeeping power of platforms, while communication policy scholars (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a; 2018; Hintz, 2014) mainly discuss the governance power of platforms.

While it is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between platform gatekeeping and platform governance, as both involve information controlling practices, this thesis differentiates them according to different types of controlling activities. Platform gatekeeping involves activities like channeling, selection, displaying, curating, personalization, and prioritization. However, information control concerning whether certain content is allowed or not allowed on platforms is classified as governance in this thesis; as such activities are traditionally discussed within the domain of Internet content governance (e.g., Breindl, 2013). In addition to content governance (such as filtering, blocking, and deleting content), platform governance also involves user governance (such as user accounts suspension or closure). In this project, the gatekeeping power of platforms will be discussed in light of platform influence on news processes (news production, distribution and consumption) and the power relations between platforms and news producers (see chapters 5 and 6). The governance power of platforms will be analyzed in relation to online content and online user governance (including surveillance) and the relations between platforms and the state (see chapters 7 and 8).

Algorithmic gatekeeping of platforms

A big difference between the gatekeeping practices of platforms and traditional media organizations is that platforms mainly rely on algorithms, rather than human editors, to sort and target their content, as they must “operate at scale” (Bell et al., 2017:83). As Facebook acknowledges, the challenge it faces is that there is “far too much information for any one person to consume [...]. That’s why stories in News Feed are [algorithmically] ranked — so that people can see what they care about first” (Mosseri, 2016: paragraph 2). That is, for large-scale platforms like Facebook, algorithms are one practical solution to the “information overload” situation.

An algorithm is “a sequence of computational steps that transform the input into the output” (Cormen et al., 2009:5). Between the input and output, an algorithm is like a “black box”, too complex to be understood in their entirety by any one person (Pasquale, 2015). As Pasquale argues, this “black box” situation may be “deliberately encouraged” by companies like Google and Facebook, because secrecy itself is a form of power and these companies can hide their values and prerogatives that algorithms enact within “black box” (p.2-8). Therefore, the decision-making process of algorithms is very different from that of traditional human editors in terms of their visibility and transparency (DeVito, 2016; Tufekci, 2015). For traditional gatekeeping, news selection criteria (such as status, relevance, and unexpectedness) can provide us with some clues into how the process has worked (e.g., O’Neill and Harcup, 2009), and the result of the editing process can be seen in their product (e.g., newspaper's pages) (Tufekci, 2015). In contrast, algorithms are often “invisible and individually tailored” (Tufekci, 2015: 208).

Although platforms have tried to position themselves as merely neutral intermediaries, algorithmic bias has been a widely researched and increasingly well-understood phenomenon (e.g., Bozdag, 2013; Gillespie, 2014; Napoli and Caplan, 2016). Firstly, it is noted that algorithmic system designers must make numerous decisions in the design and development of algorithms, and thus subjective biases get encoded into the systems (e.g., Bozdag, 2013). Secondly, values internal to algorithmic systems invite various types of biases, such as favoring novelty (how long a piece has been

posted) over popularity, prioritizing popularity (or majority interests) over niche content, and prioritizing shareability over high quality (Bell et al., 2017; Bozdag, 2013; DeVito, 2016).

Platform algorithms filter content based on a set of values or criteria. Using a content analysis of documents including Facebook's own press releases, DeVito (2016) identified nine values that drive the story section of Facebook News Feed: friend relationships, explicitly expressed user interests, prior user engagement, implicitly expressed user preferences, post age, platform priorities, page relationships, negatively expressed preferences and content quality. That is to say, Facebook filters content mainly based on the expressed (explicitly and implicitly) preferences and actions of users and values internal to the system (such as prioritizing friend relationships). Behind these values is Facebook's profit-seeking drive. As Adam Mosseri (2016: paragraph 10), the former head of Facebook News Feed and the current head of Instagram, acknowledged:

We don't favor specific kinds of sources—or ideas. Our aim is to deliver the types of stories [...] an individual person most wants to see. *We do this [...] because it's good for our business.* When people see content they are interested in, they are more likely to spend time on News Feed and enjoy their experience (emphasis added).

In other words, platforms like Facebook do not care much about what content should be delivered (as traditional news organizations do), instead they mainly care about what individual users are interested in. This is one of the reasons that have led Bell et al. (2017) to argue that platforms have brought “structural problems” to journalism, as platform business (mainly advertisement-based) incentivizes the spread of “low-quality content over high-quality material” (p.10). Such structural problems have also been seen in China's context, where platform algorithms also prioritize clicks and shareability over content quality, which will be discussed in section 5.2.

In addition to the values of platform algorithms, the impact of algorithmic gatekeeping on news processes (namely, news production, distribution and consumption) has been widely researched in recent years (e.g. Bell et al., 2017; Gillespie, 2017b). Regarding its impact on news production, a common concern is that news producers are forced to tailor their content to algorithms. Analyzing the construction of visibility on Facebook's News Feed, Bucher (2012) argues that those who want to be on top of the information flow are now facing "the threat of invisibility" and have to cater to the algorithms (p.1164). Similarly, Van Dijck et al. (2018) note that since news producers now target platforms to distribute and monetize their content, the production of news has become "progressively tailored to obey the mechanisms and organizing principles driving the platform ecosystem" (p.50).

As for the impact on news distribution, platform algorithms have now largely replaced human editors, sitting between news producers and news consumers. As Bell et al. (2017:10) observe:

While news might reach more people than ever before, for the first time, the audience has no way of knowing how or why it reaches them[...], publishers are producing more content than ever, without knowing who it is reaching or how—they are at the mercy of the algorithm.

This is why when platforms change their algorithms, such decisions often have consequences for news producers. For example, when Facebook downgraded news and prioritized posts from friends and family in its News Feed in 2016 and in 2018, many news publishers, especially those digital-born news outlets such as BuzzFeed, were hit in terms of online readership (e.g., Chaykowski, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Algorithmic gatekeeping of platforms has led to the personalization of news consumption, which has been criticized for causing the so-called "filter bubble" or "echo chamber" effects. These are two related but different effects: the "filter bubble" effect means that algorithmic personalization decreases

information diversity and leaves us isolated in our own enclosed bubble (Pariser, 2011); while the “echo chamber” (or “information cocoons”) effect suggests that individuals are only exposed to information from like-minded sources (Sunstein, 2001). However, a number of large-scale empirical studies have so far found no or only a small level of such effects (e.g., Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015; Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2018; Moeller et al., 2016). For example, based on a cross-sectional survey, Moeller et al. (2016) find that the use of algorithmically personalized news does not lead to a small common core in which few topics are discussed extensively, one of the concerns raised by Pariser (2011) in relation to the “filter bubble” effect. To empirically examine the assumed “echo chamber” effect on Facebook, Bakshy et al. (2015: 1131) measured 10.1 million U.S. Facebook users’ interaction with socially shared news (using unidentified data set from Facebook) and concluded that on average there was “slightly less” cross-cutting content after algorithmic ranking. They found out that, compared to the influence of Facebook algorithms, individuals’ own choices played a stronger role in limiting exposure to ideologically diverse content. Based on these empirical studies, it seems that the commonplace assumption of algorithmic “filter bubble” or “echo chamber” effects may need more evidence.

Non-algorithmic gatekeeping

In addition to algorithms, platforms also exercise gatekeeping through mechanisms including technical designs, editorial intervention, and social filtering (e.g., DeNardis, 2012; Bell et al., 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2016). As DeNardis (2012) argues, technical design architecture and policy decisions of private industry are “hidden levers of Internet control” (p.721). One prominent technical design of platforms is the so-called “datafication” mechanism, which has brought profound changes in news production practices. Datafication refers to “the ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before” (Van Dijck et al., 2018: 31). Within the platform system, almost all aspects of user online behaviours (e.g., location, the websites browsed, and the time spent on certain pages) can be translated into behavioural data (Zuboff, 2019).

That is to say, while audience monitoring has long existed in the news industry, the “fully quantified audience” has become a reality only with the development of the networked infrastructure (Van Dijck et al., 2018:54). As Van Dijck et al. (2018) note, with this level of audience metrics, news producers can now trace how their content circulates online and integrate relevant audience data into their operations, such as responding to real-time trends and testing out various headlines.

Another gatekeeping mechanism of platforms is human editorial intervention. Although Western platforms often emphasize the lack of human intervention to avoid being defined as media companies with the corresponding responsibilities and liabilities (Napoli and Caplan, 2016), they are increasingly involved in “editorial territory” (Bell et al., 2017:19). For example, Twitter’s Moments provides “curated stories” around top stories (Twitter, n.d.). Similarly, Apple News publicly states that its Top Stories section is “chosen by the Apple News editors”.²⁷ Another example is that Facebook was revealed to have hired editorial staff in curating content and suppressing conservative news in its Trending Topics (Nunez, 2016). Human editorial intervention of platforms is also exemplified through their policies prioritizing certain types of content. It is reported that Facebook paid millions of dollars to make deals with major publishers (such as *BuzzFeed* and *The New York Times*) and independent influencers to get them to use Facebook Live platform (Mediakix, 2017). As Bell et al. (2017) observe, by encouraging news organizations to produce particular types of content (such as live video), platforms are “explicitly editorial” (p.10). Compared to Western platforms, human editorial intervention is more obvious with Chinese platforms, which will be examined in chapter 5.

In addition, social filtering or social recommending through platform users is also an important gatekeeping mechanism of platforms. Gatekeeping theorists Shoemaker and Vos (2009) noted that Internet users had become the “secondary” gatekeepers, whose role “begins when the usual mass media

²⁷This line “chosen by the Apple News editors” is placed immediately under the heading of “Top Stories” on mobile Apple News (accessed 20 August 2019).

process stops” (p.7). Singer (2013) also argues that users have become “secondary gatekeepers” of the content published on media websites, who can “upgrade or downgrade the visibility” of news items for a secondary audience (p.55). However, these scholars were not discussing the role of users in a platform setting; and for them, news organizations are still the primary gatekeepers. This approach was critiqued by Meraz and Papacharissi (2016), who argue for a “networked gatekeeping” theory set in a networked and crowd-centered environment such as Twitter and Facebook. According to them, networked publics are connected to the processes of news production and distribution “independent of and in conjunction with traditional media newsrooms”; and collaborative or social filtering process “elevates participating publics to gatekeeping status” (pp.98-101). In discussing the role of platform users in news processes, this thesis will follow the approach of Meraz and Papacharissi. That is, platform users are not only the “secondary” gatekeepers, but a type of gatekeepers co-existing with other types of gatekeepers (such as news producers) in the platform ecosystem (see section 5.2.2).

3.2.2 Governance power of platforms

In discussing the governance power of platforms, it is important to differentiate between governance *of* platforms and governance *by* platforms. Gillespie (2017a) makes a clear differentiation between them: the former refers to policies setting the “liabilities” of platforms for user content and activities they host; the latter means that the platforms take on the “responsibility” of policing the content and activity of their users (p.2). In other words, governance *of* platforms is exercised by policy-makers and concerns the liabilities of platforms (usually legally obliged), while governance *by* platforms is exercised by platforms and refers to the responsibilities of platforms (socially or legally obliged). Here, the governance power of platforms refers to governance *by* platforms, which has led to the discussion of online content or speech being privately governed or the “privatization” of online governance (e.g., Balkin, 2017; DeNardis and Hackl, 2015; Gillespie, 2017a; Hintz, 2014). Governance *of* platforms will be discussed in the next section.

Private governance by platforms

As discussed earlier, the governance power of platforms includes two parts: information (or user content) control and user control. Here, “user” refers to not only end users, but also news producers who use platforms to distribute content and engage with the public. In terms of user content control, there are generally two approaches adopted by Western platforms: content removal and content rating or marking (Gillespie, 2017a: 20). These two approaches have different consequences: content removal shows a “decisive commitment to protection”, but it is a “blunt instrument”: removing certain content for everyone rather than just for those who were offended. In contrast, the latter approach is “less invasive”, as it allows problematic content to stay, but marking or rating them as such, so that users who want to avoid them can avoid (Gillespie, 2017a: 20-21). In China, the dominance of domestic platforms allows the government to require platforms to remove relevant content, which “quickly and reliably” deletes content deemed to be inappropriate (Pan, 2015:167). In contrast, most other autocratic regimes such as Malaysia, Morocco and Egypt, where US-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter are dominant, have to rely on content blocking in engaging censorship, which is “less effective” in reducing the potential risk posed by platforms regarding social coordination, as content blocked can still be accessed using circumvention technologies (Pan, 2015:168).

As for platform control of users, the common practices include user account suspension or closure and some user management measures including real-name registration (Gillespie, 2017a). Real-name registration and user identity verification are an important part of China’s Internet governance, which has obvious implications for platform surveillance and will be discussed in chapter 7. In the West, some platforms like Facebook also advocate real-name registration. Facebook has insisted its users use “the name they go by in everyday life”, and this ensures that “you always know who you're connecting with” (Facebook, n.d.-b). Due to the spreading of disinformation on platforms, there are increasing calls in recent years for some sort of real identity verification on social media in the West (e.g., Burns, 2018).

A key feature of platform governance is that platforms promulgate their own rules when governing their sites (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a; 2018; Hintz, 2014). That is, platforms are not only implementing laws and regulations, but are “actively formulating and setting policy” (Hintz, 2014: 350). As for what is allowed or not allowed on platforms, the guidelines of different platforms show “striking similarities”, since platforms often face the same kinds of problematic content and behaviour, such as sexual and pornographic content; hate speech; harassment; representation of violence, self-harm and drug-use, and often “look to each other for guidance on how to address them” (Gillespie, 2017a:14).

The above discussion has led scholars to argue that private platforms have become the “custodians” of the Internet (Gillespie, 2018a) or the “deciders” of free speech (Rosen, 2012), playing a “decisive role in promoting or constraining free speech online” (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015: 761). As Balkin (2017) notes, within their own territories, private platforms are acting like national governments. However, private governance by platforms has been criticized for lacking “due process and transparency”: while private platforms may claim to “exercise power benevolently”, they may make “arbitrary” judgements in governing online speech (Balkin, 2017:1197). Private governance by platforms in China will be examined in chapter 7.

“Problem of scale” and platform surveillance

As Gillespie (2018a) notes, the most obvious difference between platform moderation and content moderation in the pre-platform era is “the sheer number of users, the sheer amount of content, and the relentless pace at which they circulate” (p.74). For example, on Facebook, more than 350 million photos are uploaded each day and people watch more than 100 million hours of video every day (Smith, 2019). Therefore, on large-scale platforms, there is “simply too much content and activity being posted to support a proactive review process”, which has caused the “problem of scale” (Gillespie, 2017a:15-16). This is why nearly all platforms have adopted the “publish-then-filter” model regarding content moderation (Shirky, 2008), which means

user content is often “immediately public” and platforms can remove or mark questionable content only after that (Gillespie, 2018a:75).

Gillespie (2018a) has identified three “imperfect” solutions to the “problem of scale” (pp.74-77). The first solution for platforms is to hire more content moderators to tackle this issue. For Western platforms, content moderators are often employed on a contract or freelance basis by platforms, many of whom are cheaper labor working outside the United States (Gillespie, 2017a: 17). Secondly, platforms are outsourcing content moderation to platform users, relying on them to flag or report problematic content to platforms (Crawford and Gillespie, 2014; Gillespie, 2018b). In this way, platforms have turned the entire population of users to “amateur editors and police” (Gillespie, 2018b: 201). Thirdly, platforms are developing capability of automatic or algorithmic moderation (Gillespie, 2018a:77). While algorithmic moderation is supposed to take much of the workload from human moderators, it is often far “more difficult for an algorithm to filter an obviously fake news story than a human judgment” (Bell et al., 2017: 83). Algorithmic moderation has also caused concerns over the automated constraint of speech, as Jonathan Albright (2017)²⁸ observes:

It’s likely to normalize the weeding out of viewpoints that are in conflict with established interests [...]. In the coming decade, AI-powered smart filters developed by technology companies will weigh the legitimacy of information before audiences ever get a chance to determine it for themselves (cited in Bell et al., 2017:83).

It is easy to see that these three solutions suggested by Gillespie are indeed “imperfect”, as they cannot solve the “problem of scale” completely and some practices, such as recruiting cheap labor and relying on machines to conduct content moderation, are actually controversial. Chinese platforms are facing the same “problem of scale” and they are adopting similar mechanisms in dealing with this problem, which will be examined in section 7.2.

²⁸Jonathan Albright is the Director of Research at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism.

Other than the above three “imperfect solutions”, platform surveillance can be another solution in terms of content governance exercised by platforms. As Balkin (2017) argues, platforms (and other digital infrastructural companies) have the technical and bureaucratic capacity to govern speech, through a series of mechanisms including “digital surveillance” (p.1175). Lyon (2007) defines surveillance as “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (p.14). Drawing on Lyon, this thesis understands platform surveillance as the systematic and constant attention paid by platforms to user personal information and online behaviours for purposes of profit-making (e.g., through targeted advertising), influence (e.g., influencing user behaviours), management, or protection (i.e., protecting users from offending content). Here, profit-making is one of the main purposes of platform surveillance, as surveillance marketing (i.e., selling user data to advertisers) is the primary business of platforms (e.g., Taplin, 2017; Zuboff, 2019) or the “DNA of platform capital” (Manokha, 2018b: 891). In addition to this commercial purpose, platform surveillance can also work for the goals of the state (e.g., Hintz, 2016), which will be discussed in the next section.

Contemporary digital surveillance, based on information technologies, is ubiquitous by its nature, leading some scholars to claim that we are living in a “surveillance society” (e.g., Gandy, 1989; Lyon, 1994; 2001). Mark Poster (1990) called digital surveillance “superpanopticon”: ²⁹“Today’s ‘circuits of communication’ and the databases they generate constitute a Superpanopticon, a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards” (cited in Fuchs et al., 2013:1). Due to the afore-mentioned

²⁹The panopticon is a type of prison architecture consisting of a rotunda with an inspection house at its centre to allow all inmates to be observed by one single guard. As inmates cannot know when they are being watched, they are motivated to act as though they are being watched at all times. This prison architecture, designed by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, is the central idea of Michel Foucault’s work on surveillance.

datafication design, digital surveillance in the platform era has risen to a new level in terms of the scale of user data platforms collect. As Schneier (2015) notes, today's surveillance is "ubiquitous mass surveillance", resulting in "unprecedented corporate access to and control over our most intimate information" (p.7). One reason that surveillance adds to the governance power of platforms is that it can create a Foucauldian "panoptic" setting and thus encourage "self-restraint and self-censorship" from platform users (Manokha, 2018a: 221). This feature of platform surveillance makes it an effective tool for the Chinese state's Internet governance, which will be discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

It is useful to note that platform surveillance is not necessarily conducted by platforms themselves. As discussed above, platforms rely on the entire population of news consumers to flag or report illegal or offending content (Crawford and Gillespie, 2014; Gillespie, 2018a). Such flagging or reporting activities of news consumers can be seen as a form of surveillance. As Manokha (2018a) argues, modern communication and information technologies enable different forms of surveillance, including "peer-to-peer" surveillance carried out by individuals over individuals (p.221). In other words, the role of platform users is a crucial part of platform surveillance.

3.3 Internet governance in the platform era

In recent years, the media power of platforms has drawn increasing attention around the world, especially since the 2016 American presidential election, in which platforms like Facebook were blamed for spreading "fake news" and eroding the informational underpinnings of democracy (e.g., Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Bell et al., 2017). Regarding the state's response to the media power of platforms, two debated issues are interconnected: first, whether to and how to regulate platforms (e.g., Andrews, 2016; Gillespie, 2018b; Tambini, 2018b); second, how to regulate or govern online content in the platform era (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a). This section reviews

relevant literature concerning these two issues.

3.3.1 Debates around platform regulation

In the West, debates around regulating the power of platforms in the news sphere only emerged in recent years. As Napoli and Caplan (2016) note, the attention of policymakers on platforms was “overwhelmingly” on privacy-related issues, and “only now are we beginning to see conversations about the role of these platforms in the contemporary news and information ecosystem make some tentative inroads into communication policy discourse” (p.21). Currently, such debates in the West mainly focus on two aspects: whether to regulate platforms and how to regulate platforms. This is very different from the situation in China, where platforms are explicitly defined and regulated as Internet News Information Service (INIS) providers (see chapter 7). Thus, this sub-section will mainly focus on the relevant debates in the West.

Whether to regulate platforms

As for whether to regulate platforms, the approaches or strategies differ dramatically in various territories. In the US, Section 230 of the 1996 Communication Decency Act is generally referred to as the “safe harbor” principle, which offers protection to Internet intermediaries from being held liable for the content and activities of their users (e.g., Balkin, 2018; Mueller, 2015; Gillespie, 2017a). As Mueller (2015) notes, section 230 has two parts: the first is to protect Internet intermediaries from being held liable for their users’ speech in order to promote freedom of expression and diversity online; the second is to make them immune if they do choose to police their sites, so as to enhance their ability to delete or monitor bad content (p.2). While this “safe harbor” principle was established before today’s popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter were even born, it continues to influence people’s perceptions about the role and responsibilities of Internet intermediaries in the U.S. (Gillespie, 2017a: 7-8).

Outside the U.S., other countries do not have the same level of “safe harbor” protection for Internet intermediaries. MacKinnon et al. (2015) classify the approaches of U.S. and most European Union nations as “broad immunity”

and “conditional liability” for Internet intermediaries, respectively (pp.40-42). The approach of the latter is akin to the U.S. rules for copyright (Gillespie, 2017a:7). According to the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act (passed in 1998), Internet intermediaries are not held liable for the copyright infringement of their users, as long as they do not have actual knowledge of the infringing material and respond to requests from the state or courts and copyright holders (often described as the “notice-and-takedown” procedure). In contrast, MacKinnon et al. (2015) call China’s approach of regulating Internet intermediaries as “strict liability” (p.40), in that the intermediaries are required to proactively censor their sites.

Gillespie (2017a) has summarized the limitations of this “safe harbor” principle when applied to today’s platforms. Firstly, the principle was developed mainly to protect Internet intermediaries, but today’s platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, are different in that they sometimes “curate” content rather than only serve as content “conduits” (p.7). Secondly, though the majority of major platforms are based in the U.S., they are operating in territories where governments impose stricter liabilities on platforms. Thirdly, platforms are increasingly required by both governments and the public to tackle specific kinds of abhorrent content or behaviour, such as terrorism and extremist content, harassment and hate speech. These factors have increased calls for the reconsideration of this “safe harbor” principle in the West.

In recent years, the prominent role of platforms in the news sphere and the implications of platforms for issues of public interests (e.g., democracy, media diversity, and freedom of speech) have also driven calls for regulating platforms. As Mansell (2015) observes, “Regulatory frameworks are designed to ensure, whatever power intermediary market players may have, that it is exercised in a way that is aligned with consumer and citizen interests” (p.2). Debates around media governance in the West have been traditionally grounded in the concept of the “public interest”, which serves as a “guidepost” for policymakers in their formulation of policies (McQuail, 1992, cited in Napoli, 2015:752). Because of such calls, some Western countries have made their steps in holding platforms liable for certain types of content. For

example, Germany passed a law in 2017 stipulating that digital platforms like Google and Facebook could face fines of up to €50 million if they fail to remove illegal hate speech within 24 hours (BBC News, 2018).

Despite the increasing calls for regulating platforms and some initiatives taken by some Western countries in this area, there still exists strong opposition to holding platforms liable for the content they host in the West, especially in the United States. As Gillespie (2017a) observes, in the U.S., regulation of platforms is “limited by a fundamental reluctance to constrain speech” (p.2). Such reluctance is also supported by empirical research. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, while there is some public appetite for state intervention regarding fake news, especially in Europe (60%) and Asia (63%), only four in ten Americans (41%) thought that the government should do more through regulating platforms (Neuman et al., 2018).

One main concern related to the reluctance of regulating platforms in the West is that holding platforms liable for the content they host may lead to over-censorship. This concern can be explained by what Balkin (2017) calls the “collateral censorship” phenomenon, which occurs when the state aims at A (i.e., platforms) in order to control the speech of B (i.e., independent speakers) (p.1176). As Balkin argues, when nation states put pressure on digital infrastructure providers to censor the speech of their users, it tends to cause problems of “over-block and over-censor” to avoid liability or government sanction, which is the “flip side” of holding platforms liable for content they host (pp.1176-1177).

How to regulate platforms

Although there is no consensus in the West on whether platforms should be held liable for the content they host, there is “a global consensus that something must be done about powerful Internet platforms”, and the focus of relevant debates has so far shifted from whether to regulate platforms to “how, and by whom, Internet platforms should be regulated” (Tambini, 2018b: paragraph 2). As for how to regulate platforms, different approaches have

been suggested in the West, which mainly include: (1) regulating platforms as “public utilities” (e.g., boyd, 2010; Thompson, 2010); (2) regulating platforms using antitrust law (e.g., Hubbad, 2017; Illing, 2018); (3) regulating platforms as media companies (e.g., Andrews, 2016; Napoli and Caplan, 2017); and (4) regulating platforms as a hybrid (between intermediaries and media companies) (e.g., Gillespie, 2018b). Here, only the latter two approaches will be discussed, as regulating platforms as “public utilities” has so far almost entirely focused on “the physical layer of the Internet” (Thierer, 2012: 249) and the approach of resorting to antitrust law mainly focuses on the market power of platforms. In other words, the former two approaches do not focus on the media power of platforms: the focus of this project.

Given their power in the news sphere (as discussed in the last section), some scholars have argued that platforms such as Google and Facebook have become some of the most important media companies in the 21st century (e.g., Napoli and Caplan, 2016). However, it is worth noting that platform companies have long refused to be defined as media companies, but instead have insisted to be viewed as technology companies. Reasons that these platform companies have given for the “tech-company-not-media-company” argument mainly include: (1) “We don’t produce content”; (2) “We’re computer scientists”; (3) “No human editorial intervention” (Napoli and Caplan, 2016:8-14). However, as Napoli and Caplan argue, these justifications are all groundless or “ill-informed understanding of media” (p.10). They have refuted this argument by putting forward some counter examples. For example, content production is not the only defining characteristic of a media company, and many media companies such as cable and satellite companies have been in the business of content distribution. Similarly, the nature of their personnel is also not a defining characteristic for media companies, as engineers were at the core of early radio broadcasting and satellite broadcasting. Again, the asserted absence of a human editor just changes the “mechanism of exercising gatekeeping”, rather than the fundamental institutional identity of the gatekeepers.

In recent years, as some platform companies have increasingly entered the

territory of content production or curation (as discussed in section 3.2.1) and have hired more content-related employees (e.g., content editors and content moderators), the foundation for supporting their “not-media-company” argument has been further eroded. In fact, many Western platform companies such as Facebook and Google started to admit that they are media companies in a sense, only that they are not “traditional” media companies (Napoli and Caplan, 2017). The “not-media-company” argument and the change of attitude relating to their identities have also been witnessed with Chinese platforms (especially Toutiao, see section 2.1).

The rationale behind this self-definition of platforms is that such discursive framing has important implications for the legal and regulatory frameworks that are applied to them (Napoli and Caplan, 2017). If being defined as “media companies”, platforms like Facebook may be held liable for the content they host and be required to fulfill a series of obligations linked to public interests. Such obligations include basic responsibilities like protection of minors and prevention of hate speech (Andrews, 2016) and also affirmative obligations in the electronic media sector related to policy principles such as diversity, competition and localism (e.g., Helberger et al., 2015; Napoli and Caplan, 2017). Given these responsibilities and obligations, it is easy to understand why platforms are reluctant to be defined as media companies. In fact, even the use of the term “platform” is a strategic choice for many digital media companies to “position themselves [...] to strike a regulatory sweet spot between legislative protections that benefit them and obligations that do not” (Gillespie, 2010:2).

Gillespie (2018a) is among scholars who supports a more cautious or middle way in regulating platforms. He argues that platforms are neither mere information conduits nor traditional media companies, but a “hybrid” in between. Therefore, “safe harbor” principle should be paired with public obligations when applied to platforms. The suggested obligations mainly include: transparency obligations (e.g., platforms could be required to report data on the process of moderation to the public or to a regulatory agency); minimum standards for moderation (e.g., minimum standards for the worst

content, minimum response times, etc.); financial contributions to support news organizations and digital literacy programs and so on (pp. 213-215).

3.3.2 New governance approach and platform surveillance

In the platform era, one prominent feature of Internet content governance is the above discussed “problem of scale” (Gillespie, 2017a), which means it is almost impossible for the state to exercise effective control over online content directly. Such a situation has led to emerging discussion of a new Internet governance approach in the platform era: platforms enforce Internet governance on behalf of the state (Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a). Another unique feature of Internet governance in the platform era is the role of platform surveillance. While a rapidly expanding body of literature has examined platform surveillance, most of which focused on its commercial purpose (e.g., Fuchs, 2011; Zuboff, 2019), only a few scholars have linked them to state control in the Western context (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Hintz, 2016). That is to say, literature concerning a new Internet governance approach and platform surveillance as an instrument of Internet governance is just emerging and much needed. This is a main research gap this thesis aims to fill by examining China’s new framework of Internet governance and the role of platform surveillance within it.

New approach of Internet governance

When discussing governance by platforms, it is useful to further differentiate two forms of governance activities of the platforms: those carried out “on their own” or in their own interests; and those carried out to “meet legal requirements” (Gillespie, 2017a: 2). Of these two forms of activities, the former is mostly out of “economic reasons”, because platforms aim to keep their users; protect their corporate reputation; attract advertisers; and so on (Gillespie, 2017a:12-13). The latter form of governance by platforms is what I call “state governance *through* platforms” (this governance approach will be presented and discussed against China’s context in section 7.2). As Gillespie (2017:23) notes, this new approach of Internet governance may be “a convenience or a strategy”:

Platforms do have the means to intervene in the circulation of abhorrent content and at the moment of abhorrent behaviour. Chasing individual bad actors is difficult, consumes time and resources, and makes little impact: getting a platform to intervene systematically promises to have a much broader impact.

That is to say, compared to traditional Internet governance, Internet governance *through* platforms is a much more efficient way for governments or independent regulators to govern the online world, given that policing a major platform is time-and-resource-consuming and platforms do have the “means” to intervene. The situation in China is very similar. As Xie and Xiu (2017) point out, given that platforms have become online information gatekeepers and have the technological tools that the Chinese government does not have, cooperation between the government and platforms in China’s Internet governance becomes a “practical choice” (p.7).

Similar to this governance *through* platforms model, Balkin (2017) has argued for a “new school” speech regulation: public-private cooperation in the regulation of online speech. Under this “new school” model, the state mainly targets the owners of digital infrastructure (such as cloud services, Internet services providers, social media platforms, search engines, payment system), hoping to “coerce or coopt them into regulating speech on the nation state’s behalf” (p.1153). In contrast, under the “old school” model, the state primarily targets “speakers and publishers of content” and adopts traditional methods of enforcement, such as civil and criminal fines, imprisonment, and “in some countries, violence or the threat of violence to deter and censor speakers and publishers” (p. 1174). Balkin argues that, while nation states have not abandoned old school speech regulation, they have increasingly moved to new school speech regulation. This is because: first, online speech in today’s digital media environment is hard to govern, as online speakers may be anonymous, located outside the country, and they may not be human at all, but an army of bots; second, digital infrastructural companies have the “technical and bureaucratic capacity” to govern speech (p.1175). These reasons given by Balkin are very similar to those stated by Gillespie (see the

above quotation).

While emphasizing the public-private cooperation under the “new school” speech regulation model, Balkin (2017:1153) has also identified the tensions between the state and private platforms:

The largest owners of private infrastructure are so powerful that we might even regard them as special-purpose sovereigns; they engage in perpetual struggles for control of digital networks with nation states, who, in turn, want to control and coopt these powerful players.

According to Balkin, apart from cooperation, there are also control and resistance in the relations between platforms and the state. Is this observation also true in China’s context? China’s state-platform relations in relation to Internet governance will be discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

Platform surveillance for state control

As discussed in section 3.2.2, surveillance is part of the governance power or governance mechanisms of private platforms. In addition to enhancing the ability of platforms in providing personalized services and targeted advertising, platform surveillance can also work for the benefits of the state (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Hintz, 2014; 2016; Schneier, 2015). As Hintz (2014) notes, the Edward Snowden case³⁰ in 2013 has demonstrated that private platforms are now “at the centre” of state efforts to monitor citizens and Internet user behaviour (p.360).

Many studies have focused on state online surveillance in the Western or Chinese contexts (e.g., Greenwald, 2014; Tsui, 2003), and only a limited number of studies have discussed the state-platform or public-private

³⁰ Edward Snowden is an American whistleblower who copied and leaked highly classified information from the National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013 when he was a NSA sub-contractor. Among the leaked information was a previously undisclosed NSA program called Prism, which allows American government officials to tap into private user data (such as search history, emails, file transfers and live chats) hosted by major technology companies including Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook. See for example: <https://www.theverge.com/2013/7/17/4517480/nsa-spying-prism-surveillance-cheat-sheet>

partnership or cooperation regarding surveillance (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Hintz, 2016; Schneier, 2015). Such cooperation has significant implications for the state's Internet governance or Internet control. As Schneier (2015) argues, "public-private surveillance partnership" is the primary reason that surveillance is so pervasive in today's society, and it has caused "chilling effects" on free speech and free thought (p.7). Balkin (2017) also points out, "the development of privately-owned and privately-employed digital technologies of control and surveillance" is crucial in making the new school speech regulation possible (p.1182).

One way for private platforms to help the state in governing the online world is to surveil end-users and disclose their personal information and online activities to government departments (Balkin, 2017: 1179). The Edward Snowden case has shown that US-based digital media companies like Facebook and Google have cooperated with the American government and turned over user data to the National Security Agency (Taplin, 2017). In China, previous research has noted that the Chinese government outsources many censorship and surveillance tasks to domestic private Internet companies (e.g., MacKinnon, 2011; Walker and Ortung, 2015). Another way platform surveillance can help the state in enhancing Internet governance is that it encourages self-censorship (as discussed above). As Fuchs (2008) notes, surveillance forces individuals and groups to "behave or not behave in certain ways" because they know that their appearance, movements, location, or ideas are or could be watched by surveillance systems (pp. 267-277).

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has reviewed relevant literature of three areas: media power theories, media power of platforms, and debates around platform regulation and Internet governance in the platform era. As for media power theories, this chapter has reviewed literature from two different perspectives: media power as symbolic power and as relational power. This thesis understands media power from both perspectives. As a symbolic power, media power refers to the power of media content over its audiences or consumers, and thus media power is linked to public opinion control. Literature concerning two specific

media effects models that are closely linked to public opinion—agenda-setting and framing—has been reviewed, and these two models will be discussed in China’s context in later chapters. As a relational power, media power is understood as the relationships between media institutions or media producers (both traditional and digital media) and other social actors such as the state and news consumers. Given that this thesis focuses on *structural* changes brought by platforms, this second perspective is particularly helpful in constructing the analysis framework of this thesis.

As for literature concerning the media power of platforms, this chapter has redefined and discussed gatekeeping power and governance power of platforms. As for gatekeeping power of platforms, it has arrived that platforms have been exercising gatekeeping power, whether through algorithms or non-algorithmic mechanisms, over news producers and news consumers and have prominent implications for news processes (i.e., news production, distribution and consumption). Regarding the governance power of platforms, it has differentiated private governance *by* platforms from governance *of* private platforms and has discussed the so-called “problem of scale” in the platform era and several solutions, including platform surveillance, to this problem. As almost all relevant literature concerning the gatekeeping power and governance power of platforms is set in the Western context, this thesis can contribute in this area by examining the media power of platforms in China’s context.

In terms of literature regarding Internet governance in the platform era, this chapter has focused on the emerging literature concerning a new Internet governance approach and the role of platform surveillance in Internet governance. It has discussed the new approach argued by both Gillespie (2017a) and Balkin (2017): targeting platforms rather than individual speakers. As for platform surveillance, while some scholars have linked it to state control, research on its implications for Internet governance is still much needed. A new Internet governance approach in the platform era and the role of platform surveillance in Internet governance are two main areas in which this thesis can make its contribution.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

This thesis aims to answer the overall research question: *How do digital media platforms influence China's news sphere and the party-state's public opinion control?* To answer this question, this thesis adopts two complementary qualitative methods: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior executives from Chinese major platforms and with senior media professionals from Chinese news organizations (some are at the same time self-media operators); (2) analysis of various types of documents (e.g., government regulations; official documents from platforms; media outputs; and third-party research reports). For both methods, the purpose is to obtain evidence about the influence of platforms on China's news processes, the media power structure, and the state's public opinion control.

This chapter breaks into four sections. Section one focuses on the overall research design. It mainly discusses the two qualitative methods adopted, including the justifications for choosing them and a reflection on their strengths and limitations. In addition, it provides a brief explanation about how empirical data are analyzed and combined to construct my own theoretical models. Section two discusses the sampling strategy of the two qualitative methods and describes the interview sample and document sample respectively. Section three gives an account of the data gathering process and reflects on the decisions and choices made during the process. The last section discusses some issues (i.e., ethical and credibility concerns) arising from the research design and data gathering processes and my solutions to tackle them.

4.1 Overview of research design

As discussed in section 1.2, this thesis will not conduct audience research to evaluate media power or public opinion, as I have chosen to focus on the *structural* changes brought about by platforms in relation to news processes, media power structure and public opinion control. Therefore, it is more useful to seek the opinions and insights from relevant actors within these structures than to focus on the impact of media content on news consumers. For this

reason, the qualitative interview, a resource for understanding “how individuals make sense of their social world and act within it” (May, 2011:157), is a suitable method for this project.

A semi-structured interview is a form of qualitative interview between the two extreme types of interviews—structured quantitative interview (e.g., survey) and unstructured qualitative interview (e.g., life-history, biographical, and oral history interviews). Compared to structured quantitative interviews, qualitative interviews are more flexible, dynamic, and open-ended; they allow the interviewers to get richer and more detailed answers, and even to adjust the research emphasis if significant issues emerge in the course of interviews (e.g., Bryman, 2016; May, 2011; Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015). Given that this thesis examines a research question that is not quantifiable, qualitative interviews are plainly the most suitable choice. Also, because I already have a clear research focus, semi-structured interviews, where the interviewers often loosely follow a topic guide, are more suitable for this project than unstructured interviews, where the interviewees are encouraged to answer questions “within their own frame of reference” (May, 2011:136).

Qualitative interview, as a research method, has its limitations. One major limitation is that it is “prone to bias”, given that participants may have an agenda or a stake regarding the research (Boyce and Neale, 2006:3). In this project, my interviewees, treated as both insiders and experts of China’s media and Internet industries, are in an advantageous position in providing valuable observations and informed opinions. However, they are also stakeholders of the structural changes discussed in this thesis, which means agendas and thus bias may be embedded in their minds. For example, regarding the changes that platforms bring to China’s news sphere, platform executives and self-media operators are expected to emphasize more of the empowerment effects of platforms, while interviewees from news organizations may focus more on the disruptive effects of platforms on the news industry. Nevertheless, such potential bias is not necessarily a negative issue in this project. As experts of the industry, my interviewees are expected to provide their opinions and insights about the whole industry, regardless of

their identities (i.e., platform executives, media professionals, or self-media operators). At the same time, as insiders of the industry, the perspectives and opinions of my interviewees are themselves valuable in this project, shedding light on how insiders of the industry view the changes brought by platforms. In other words, the bias of my interviewees is fully expected and a part of the interview data to be collected.

Apart from semi-structured interviews, this project adopts document analysis as a complementary method. Compared to qualitative interviews, document analysis is one form of “unobtrusive method”, as documents are simply “out there” waiting to be assembled and analyzed (Bryman, 2016: 546). This project adopts a general definition for the term “documents”: “a document in its most general sense is a written text” (Scott, 1990, cited in May, 2011:195). Thus, “documents” refers to a wide range of different sources, such as government regulations, official documents from major platforms, outputs from news organizations and self-media, and third-party research reports. While documents are produced for other occasions and independent of the research agenda of this thesis, they can be used for various purposes, such as providing “background and context [...], supplementary data, a means of tracing change and development, and verification of findings from other data sources” (Bowen, 2009: 30-31). In combining interviews and document analysis, this thesis can provide a more convincing and deeper analysis of the structural changes brought about by platforms. As Bowen (2009) notes, by analyzing data gathered through different methods, the researcher can “corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study” (p.28).

A crucial issue in document analysis is how to interpret the documents. Atkinson and Coffey (2011) argue that documents are written with distinctive purposes in the minds of their producers, and thus should not be taken to be “transparent representations of an underlying organizational or social reality” (p.79). Similarly, Prior (2008) observes that social researchers often view documents as resources to be worked on and for their substantive meaning to be revealed. In other words, documents should not be seen as “facts” or a

representation of the “reality”. According to Atkinson and Goffey (2011), documents should be examined in terms of: (1) the context in which they were produced; (2) their implied readership; (3) other documents linked to them. That is to say, in analyzing documents (say, an official document from a platform), one should pay attention to its context (e.g., when and why it is produced), the readers the document targets (e.g., ordinary users, news producers or the regulators) and other relevant documents (e.g., whether this document is a response to government regulations). These three aspects will be taken into consideration when conducting document analysis.

Data from the above two methods, primary data collected from interviews and secondary data from documents, will be combined together in answering the research questions. While interview data will be presented in the form of quotes from my interviewees, document data will be displayed in the form of excerpts, quotes (secondary quotes), examples, and sometimes simple factual information to provide background and context (in the case of factual media outputs and some research reports). While the data gathering processes of interviews and document analysis are different, the analytical procedures of them are often quite similar: both involve the processes of selection,³¹ appraising and synthesizing; in both cases, the data are organized into major themes, categories, or case examples (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2016).

It is important to note that although this thesis is mainly based on empirical data, it, in the meantime, has a distinct characteristic of theoretical construction. Based on my empirical data and drawing on existing literature, I have developed my own models for China’s structural changes in terms of news processes, media power structure, and Internet governance in the platform era. In the following four analysis chapters (chapters 5-8), there are sections (or sub-sections) devoted to discussing these models. As discussed in the introduction chapter, original conceptual construction is a main contribution of this thesis.

³¹In the case of document analysis, it involves selecting the appropriate documents and the useful excerpts, quotes or information; while in the case of semi-structure interview, it involves choosing the poignant quotes from interviewees.

4.2 Research sampling

This project employs a “purposive sampling” strategy. This type of sampling, as Bryman (2016) notes, is to do with the selection of units (e.g., people, organizations, documents) with direct reference to the research questions being asked (p. 408). As this thesis examines how platforms influence China’s news sphere and public opinion control, I have identified the four main actors most relevant to answer such a question: platforms, the party-state, news organizations and self-media. The sampling of interviews and document analysis follows this categorization of main actors. As discussed in chapter 3, while news consumers are playing a more active role in news distribution and consumption in the platform era, they are not considered as a main actor in terms of shaping public opinion and thus are not included in my empirical sample.

4.2.1 Semi-structured interview

In an ideal world, the afore-mentioned four categories of actors should all be included in my interviewee sample, and the numbers of each type of interviewees should be more or less balanced. However, Chinese government officials are not available for interviews in this project, which is hardly surprising given that Chinese officials rarely participate in academic research. Thus, my interview sample includes the other three categories of actors: platform executives, senior media professionals from news organizations, and self-media operators. The main reason why I target senior executives of platforms and senior media professionals, rather than lower-level employees, is that senior executives and professionals are supposed to understand well the inner-workings of their organizations and be able to provide insights and informed opinions about the structural changes brought by platforms.

Among the sixteen interviewees, three of them are senior executives from popular private platforms. The other thirteen are all current or former media professionals (five of them being senior executives or managers) from major news outlets, which include central news organizations such as *Xinhua News Agency*, *China Central Television* and *People’s Daily* and major marketized

news organizations such as *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolis*. Among the media professionals, four of them are also self-media operators (three of them have around or over 1 million subscribers). All my interviewees have substantive knowledge of my topic, with the majority of them having 20 or more years of media working experience. A list of my interviewees, including their positions and the interviewing dates, is included in Appendix 1.

I have to acknowledge that my interview sample is not balanced: three interviewees from platforms; thirteen current or former media professionals; and four self-media operators (the latter two categories are overlapped). The reason for the limited number of interviews with platform executives and self-media operators is mainly practical, as these two categories of interviewees are more difficult for me to access than media professionals, with whom I have many contacts. For example, WeChat declined my interview request after receiving my interview guide and did not give a clear explanation. Several popular self-media operators I contacted also refused to be interviewed. Such refusal may be partly attributed to the nature of my topic, which concerns China's public opinion and thus may be seen as "sensitive" to some potential interviewees. While the imbalance of the sample may be understandable, it is necessary to admit that the sample sizes of these two categories have not reached a saturation point: when more data does not "shed any further light on the issue under investigation" (Mason, 2010:2). This is part of the reason that this project has combined document analysis as a remedy.

However, this imbalance issue will not substantially influence the quality of my interview data, given that all interviewees are treated as experts to answer the whole research questions (namely, the structural changes brought by platforms). Moreover, while the number of self-media interviewees is limited, the double identity of self-media operators—both as media professionals and independent authors—has placed them in an advantageous position to observe the structural changes brought by platforms. More importantly, the imperfect nature of my interview sample has been remedied by document

analysis of relevant documents (see next sub-section). For example, the limited number of interviews with platform executives and self-media operators is supplemented by examining official documents from platforms and outputs from self-media. Similarly, while government officials are not available for interviews, government regulations serve as an important resource to examine the response of the party-state to the challenges brought by platforms.

4.2.2 Document analysis

In this project, the selection criterion for documents is the relevance in answering the research questions. The sampling of documents is mainly based on the above-mentioned four categories or types of main actors: platforms, the party-state, news organizations and self-media operators. In addition, third-party statistics, survey data and research reports are also included to provide some quantitative evidence and third-party observations for China's transforming news environment.

Official documents from platforms

Several types of official documents from platforms are in the public domain: (1) *Policy documents from platforms*: Such policy documents mainly include *Terms of Services*, *Community Standards*, and *Official Accounts Operation Norms* (or similar titles) from major platforms. These documents set out the terms under which platforms and users interact; the obligations users must accept to be allowed to access platform services (such as real-name registration); the principles about what content is allowed or not allowed; the means to settle disputes (such as user reporting and complaining procedures); and so on. Thus, such documents are useful resources in identifying and/or analyzing the policies of platforms and also their stated or hidden values. (2) *Press releases from platforms and public speeches from platform executives*: All press releases and public speeches are *original texts* released by the companies themselves. Documents of this type are different from media outputs, as they are free from the gatekeeping of the news media. These documents are useful in analyzing the responses of platforms to the changing environment (such as a changing regulatory environment or changing public

attitudes toward platforms).

Official documents from the party-state

This project examines two main types of documents from the party-state: (1) public speeches from China's top leadership, especially President Xi Jinping; (2) relevant laws and government regulations concerning platforms. The first type of document is an important resource for analyzing the state's concerns, ideas, rationales, and policies concerning China's media and Internet governance and public opinion control. The second type of document provides the resources to analyze how the party-state has been responding to the challenges brought by platforms.

Outputs from news organizations

Media outputs cover a wide range of news organizations (both Chinese and Western media outlets). Two types of media outputs are particularly useful for my analysis: (1) *Secondary interviews conducted by journalists with executives of China's major platforms*. Such interviews are a useful supplement to my first-hand interviews, as some platform executives are not available for interviewing; (2) *Media reports and commentaries concerning debates around the role and power of platforms in news sphere*. This type of documents is useful in analyzing the response from the media industry (also from the public, media experts, and governments, which are cited as news sources in media outputs) to the changing news environment in the platform era.

Outputs from self-media

I have followed the outputs of a number of popular and influential self-media accounts, such as: (1) *Mimeng* (咪蒙), run by a former journalist from *Southern Metropolis*; (2) *Sixgod* (六神磊磊读金庸), run by a former journalist from *Xinhua News Agency*; (3) *Sun Liping Society Observe* (孙立平社会观察), run by an influential sociology professor of Tsinghua University. The purpose of following some self-media accounts is two-fold: (1) to understand the features of self-media outputs, including their topics, writing styles, stance on major incidents, issues and events, interactions with news consumers, and so

on; (2) to examine how platforms have been moderating content from self-media, such as what topics or opinions are allowed or not allowed. Outputs of self-media are a useful supplement to my interviews with self-media operators.

Third-party statistics and research reports

This type of documents mainly includes: (1) statistics about China's media and Internet market (such as the performance of various types of official accounts); (2) research reports on China's transforming news environment (such as surveys on news consumption); (3) research reports about China's online public opinion. These documents provide quantitative evidence about China's changing news environment and provide observations and analysis about the evolution of China's online public opinion and the state's corresponding responses. It is worth noting that, while documents of this type seem to be more scientifically based, they are not necessarily more objective than other types of documents, which will be reflected in the last section.

The third-party institutions or companies cited in this thesis mainly include: China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), which publishes regular statistical reports about China's Internet development; People's Daily Online, which compiles the annual Analysis Report on China's Online Public Opinion; and research companies like Penguin Intelligence (企鹅智酷) and Newrank (新榜), which produce research reports about China's new media market and news consumption.

4.3 Data gathering

This section provides a description of the data gathering process, including doing preliminary investigation, conducting interviews and collecting relevant documents. It also discusses some choices made during the process, such as the modes of conducting interviews (i.e., face-to-face, audio calls, and so on) and methods employed to collect relevant documents. In addition, this section reflects on the important decision made after preliminary investigation: narrowing down the research focus of this thesis to the role of platforms and their implications for China's news sphere and the state's public

opinion control.

4.3.1 Preliminary investigation

Before the main phase of interviewing, I had already undertaken some desk-based research through the Internet and made two preliminary investigatory trips to China in March and December 2016. During my first trip, I conducted two face-to-face interviews with a senior executive from a major news website (referred to as IE-01)³², and a senior executive from a major news magazine, who is also a popular self-media operator (referred to as IE-02). The two preliminary interviews helped me to clarify some key concepts of this project, including “self-media” and “platforms”, and also get some insights about the relations between platforms and news producers. For example, my interviewee IE-01 noted that, he did not think self-media operators were “independent”, as they had to “depend on platforms”. My interviewee IE-02 told me that when he wrote for his self-media account, his topics and writing style were quite different from those when he worked for his news organization. Both interviewees emphasized the prominent role of platforms in China’s evolving news environment.

During my second trip, I attended a self-media conference in Beijing that gathered more than 100 popular self-media operators (not many of them focusing on news content) and executives from some popular platforms. At the conference, which was organized by a self-media alliance called “We Media”, almost all the attending platforms promised to invest heavily in content; and the self-media operators present were mainly talking about how to make money through content production. For me, such conferences (there are many similar self-media conferences organized by popular platforms like Toutiao or third-party research companies like Newrank) made at least two things clear. First, platforms were not only the converging sites for news distribution and news consumption, but also were actively influencing news production by hosting various types of news producers, including self-media operators, and investing in certain type of content (like short videos). Second,

³²All my interviewees are anonymized in this project, and their names have been replaced by corresponding codes, such as IE-01, IE-02, and IE-16.

making money, rather than influencing public opinion, may be the main motivation for most popular self-media operators, which seemed to make them less of “a revolutionary force” in China’s news landscape than I initially anticipated.

The above two preliminary investigatory trips, together with my desk research and many discussions with my former colleagues and contacts in China’s news industry, helped to narrow down my research focus from China’s changing media power structure concerning multiple actors to one single central actor: platforms. At the end of my preliminary investigations, I arrived at my assumption: platforms have brought profound changes to the news environment and media power structure in China, and thus may challenge the party-state’s control of online public opinion.

4.3.2 Conducting the interviews

Apart from the two preliminary interviews, which were carried out in a relatively unstructured way, I conducted fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews during the period from November 2017 to April 2018. As for the mode of the semi-structured interviews, two were conducted in a face-to-face manner; one was conducted through WeChat chats, as the interviewee suggested to do it that way; the other eleven interviews were all conducted through WeChat audio calls, which is cost free when having Wi-Fi connections and very similar to telephone interviews. All the fourteen semi-structured interviews lasted around one hour. Semi-structured interviews (except the one conducted through WeChat chats) were audio recorded using my computer software QuickTime Player and later transcribed by myself. The two preliminary unstructured interviews were not audio-recorded (though written notes were made) to make my interviewees more comfortable in expressing their views, because, at that stage, I was still exploring the focus and scope of my research.

The different modes or ways of conducting interviews have their own advantages and disadvantages. For example, while face-to-face interviews may be beneficial for the researcher to develop some rapport with the

interviewees and pick up the latter's body language; it is much more time-consuming and expensive. Likewise, though online written interviews like WeChat chats may be less interactive compared to face-to-face interviews, the answers from the interviewees tend to be more considered because the interviewees can take time to ponder their answers (Curasi, 2001). Compared to face-to-face interviews, WeChat audio calls are cheaper, time-saving and flexible. Based on the outcome of a number of studies on mode effects of telephone and face-to-face qualitative interviewing, Bryman (2016) concludes that, overall, such studies are fairly "reassuring" regarding the quality in the telephone mode (p.485). It is worth noting that, although WeChat provides both free audio and video calls, I prefer audio calls to video calls. This is because audio rather than video calls tend to put the interviewees in a more comfortable position, given that they do not need to worry about their appearances or living/working environment. In fact, some interviewees suggested WeChat audio calls before I even mentioned the mode of interviews. However, I have to acknowledge that video calls do have their advantages, such as providing extra information through body language.

In conducting the semi-structured interviews, I followed an interview guide (see Appendix 2) in a relatively loose way. All the interviewees were asked about: (1) working experience in the news-related areas (e.g., how many years, positions held, working responsibilities); (2) changes in news processes (news production, distribution, and consumption) brought by platforms, including the role of platform algorithms; (3) views about the power relations between platforms and news producers (namely, news organizations and self-media), and between platforms and the party-state; and (4) the implications of platforms for the party-state's public opinion control, including whether the private ownership of platforms is an issue for the party-state. Apart from these common questions, different additional questions were asked for different interviewees according to various factors including the type of their organizations (e.g., platform, news organization, or self-media), positions held (e.g., executives or journalists), and working responsibilities (e.g., whether interacting with platforms). For example, for interviewees working for platforms, additional questions mainly include: how they distribute news

content from different types of news producers; on what criteria their algorithms are based (if they do adopt algorithms); how they moderate content produced by self-media; and what are their relations with government regulators. For interviewees working for news organizations, additional questions were asked about the relations between news organizations and platforms, views about the influence of self-media on public opinion, and so on. In such a way, the semi-structured interviews aim to elicit rich insights, observations, and views from each participant around my research questions.

In the course of conducting interviews, my interview guide was evolving. This is because, when some new perspectives or concepts emerged during interviews, I kept adjusting my interview guide for later interviews. For example, two metaphors used by my interviewees were incorporated into later interviews. Of them, one interviewee used the metaphor “the sea and the rivers” to describe the relations between platforms and news producers, and another interviewee used the metaphor the “own son” and the “adopted son” to describe the state’s different relations with news organizations and private platforms. These two metaphors turned out to be echoed by some later interviewees. Also, my interviews with some interviewees were not done in one session. I sent further questions to my interviewees when I found their views were not clear to me or some new developments emerged, which demonstrated the value of developing a rapport with my interviewees and the convenience of WeChat as a research tool.

4.3.3 Gathering documents

Unlike conducting interviews, gathering documents has been an on-going and continuing process. While documents are existing data out there to be collected, it does not necessarily render them “somehow less time-consuming or easier to deal with”; on the contrary, the search for documents relevant to one’s research can often be a “frustrating and highly protracted process” (Bryman, 2016:546). This is indeed true of this project.

I have employed a number of methods in gathering relevant documents. Firstly, official websites of Chinese media and Internet regulators and the

three major platforms (WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao) are among the most visited sites to collect official documents from the regulators and major platforms, including laws and government regulations, policy documents from platforms, and press releases from platforms. Secondly, search engines have been used to locate relevant documents, especially news reports and commentaries regarding the role and power of platforms in the news sphere. Frequently used searching keywords include: “WeChat”, “Weibo”, “Toutiao”, “platforms”, “Facebook”, “Twitter”, “YouTube” (or “Google”), “media power”, “news”, “journalism”, and “platform regulation” (mostly, these keywords or part of them were used together). Thirdly, I have continuously followed various types of official accounts to keep myself posted on relevant developments relating to my research questions. These accounts mainly include: several social media accounts of executives from the three major platforms (WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao); a number of self-media accounts, several accounts run by China’s third-party research institutions or companies. Besides, my personal WeChat Moment news feeds have been very useful in gathering relevant documents, as a large proportion of my WeChat friends (or contacts) are working in the media and Internet areas and some articles they shared are relevant to my research. Here, my WeChat contacts have played the role of “gatekeepers” (see section 3.2.2), making it easier for me to identify relevant documents.

Just as my interview guide was “evolving”, the archive of “relevant” documents had undergone constant changes, with some documents being added or deleted. This is partly because, as the research moved on, the research questions needed to be refined or adjusted, and thus the criteria in judging the relevance of documents also had to be adjusted. Moreover, as this thesis examines a very current topic, new evidence emerged in the course of research, even in the late writing stage. For example, a series of important new regulations concerning platforms were promulgated in 2017 and 2018, which means I had to constantly update my analysis on China’s state-platform relations.

4.4 Ethical and credibility concerns

This section discusses some issues arising from the research design and data gathering process and my solutions in tackling them. The first issue worthy of noting is ethical concerns that arise in the course of conducting this project. Diener and Grandall (1978) identified four principles when discussing ethical issues: (1) whether there is harm to participants; (2) whether there is a lack of informed consent; (3) whether there is an invasion of privacy; and (4) whether there is deception involved. Next, I will follow these four principles in discussing ethical issues involved in this project.

Potential “harm to participants” does constitute an issue in this project, mainly because my topic, which concerns the party-state’s control of public opinion, can be seen as a “sensitive” issue in China. As discussed in section 2.2.4, public opinion control is closely linked to the CCP’s legitimacy to rule. That is why some of my interviewees expressed concerns when participating in this project and asked to be anonymized. Although some other interviewees are willing for their real identities to be disclosed (partly because they know the thesis would be written in English), I have decided to anonymize all interviewees, in order to ensure that no future harm will be done to them. In anonymizing my interviewees, I have adopted a flexible approach. For some interviewees, I have included their titles and the names or scale/nature of the institutions they work for, provided that their identities will not be disclosed. In the example of “former journalist of *Southern Weekend*”, my interviewee is unlikely to be identified, given that there are at least hundreds of former journalists of *Southern Weekend*. In contrast, for interviewees from major platforms, I have used more vague language, such as “senior executive from a major platform”, given that the number of major platforms is limited in China.

Regarding another ethical principle “informed consent”, I have presented the interviewees an informed consent form that includes a brief introduction to the research project (such as working title, author, and research focus). The form also asks whether they would like to participate in the project, to be audio-recorded, and to be cited in the thesis (or future journal papers and books). The choices of the interviewees have been respected. As for the

privacy-related principle, this project does not cause such concern, as it has anonymized all interviewees and adopted a cautious approach in doing so to ensure no interviewees will be identified. Regarding “whether there is deception involved”, I did not purposely provide any misleading information about the project or consciously deceive any interviewees into participating. The interviewees have been told that if they were to change their decisions and wanted to withdraw from participation, they could do so at any time.

The second issue to be reflected upon concerns the credibility of some types of documents and of the translation of relevant documents and direct quotations from Chinese to English. While documents are treated as only resources to work on in this project, the credibility of one particular type of documents—third-party statistics, survey data, and research reports—may need more discussion, especially because this type of documents seems to be scientific or objective. It is necessary to note that the organizations or institutions that produce such documents may not be politically or economically independent. For example, the most widely cited research reports about China’s Internet industry are those compiled by the CNNIC, which is an organization under the direct leadership of China’s Internet content regulator the CAC.³³ Likewise, the annual Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion, included in the China Society Yearbooks, is produced by the research unit of the official news website *People’s Daily Online*. In addition, the research institution Penguin Intelligence is owned by the Internet giant Tencent. Although Penguin Intelligence has stated that, as a “third-party research institution”, its reports do not “represent the stance of any companies” (Penguin Intelligence, 2018:2), its relationship with Tencent still raises concerns that its reports may be biased towards platforms owned by Tencent. Given these hidden connections, it is necessary to be cautious about how some documents are produced and the motivations or agendas behind them.

³³Please see the introduction about the CNNIC. Available at: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/gywm/CNNICjs/jj/> (Accessed 8 July 2019).

While paying attention to who are behind certain survey data or research reports, it does not mean that these documents are not valuable. On the contrary, it is exactly because the annual analysis reports on China's online public opinion are produced by *People's Daily Online*, they are particularly useful in revealing the concerns and strategies of the party-state regarding online public opinion control, considering the special relations between *People's Daily* and the party-state. Similarly, precisely because the relations between the CNNIC and the Internet regulator, the reports published by the CNNIC have become the most authoritative reports concerning China's Internet development, given that the CNNIC may be best positioned in terms of resources and authority to conduct national surveys in this area. In the case of Penguin Intelligence, its survey data and research reports are valuable, partly because of its advantage in accessing the extensive data of Tencent.

To ensure the credibility of this type of document, third-party statistics, survey data, and research reports are cross-checked with other similar sources whenever possible. In addition, regarding survey data, it is important to note that they, at the best, serve as an estimate of the real market. This is especially true since China's news industry is undergoing a fast evolution, and thus survey results should be evaluated specific to the survey sample and specific time period, rather than be generalized across the whole news market.

In addition to the credibility of third-party documents, concerns over the accuracy and credibility of translation have inevitably arisen in this project, given that a large proportion of my empirical data (both interview transcripts and documents) and literature written by Chinese domestic scholars are in Chinese. To alleviate such concerns, I have adopted the following measures. Firstly, when a document has an official English version, then this English version will be cited. For example, WeChat's website provides an English version of some policy documents, such as "WeChat Terms of Service". The same principle has been applied to media outputs. When there exist both Chinese and English reports about the same events or topics, the cited news reports are often in English, which is why many news reports about China from Western news organizations have been cited. Secondly, when no official

English version of a document can be found, I search for existing English translations. For example, some scholars (e.g., Chinese scholars who can speak English or Western scholars who can speak Chinese) have done some translation of relevant Chinese laws and government regulations. However, when citing this unofficial version of documents, I have exercised caution by always checking with the original Chinese version and made necessary amendments. Thirdly, when both official and non-official English versions of a document are not available, I do the translation myself and so indicate. Fourthly, for the reference of some readers, I have included the original Chinese for important concepts and phrases along with their English translations. In the meantime, the URLs linking to the original information (e.g., websites) are included in the references whenever possible.

The third issue worth mentioning is that, in conducting this research, my personal background may have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, my long working experience as a journalist and senior news editor in China has helped me to develop a good understanding of the inner workings of Chinese news organizations, the Chinese digital media market, and the key features of China's media system. Moreover, my working experience is also crucial for me to get access to my interviewees. On the other hand, to be immersed in a system for a long time may also bring some negative impacts on myself as the researcher. This is not only because my working experience may have a part in shaping my values and beliefs, but also because many features of China's news market and media system can be too familiar to me and thus be easily taken for granted. Bearing this in mind, I have tried to diversify my sources in choosing potential interviewees as much as possible, to keep an open mind in gathering evidence and conducting the analysis, and to draw upon as many different theoretical perspectives as possible. Besides, undertaking this thesis in the UK has also created some distance from my earlier working environment.

Chapter conclusion

This methodology chapter has discussed the overall research design, the sampling strategy, the data gathering process, and some relevant concerns

arising from the research. This chapter has three distinct features. First, both research design and sampling are closely linked to the research questions and analytical framework (see chapter 1). Second, this chapter has tried to combine a clear description and a critical investigation of the research design, sampling, and data gathering, in order to provide an audit trail of how I have approached this research and to demonstrate both the strengths and limitations of the two methods adopted. Third, this chapter has shown reflective thinking throughout by acknowledging the existing limitations and concerns and providing solutions to, or justifications for, such limitations or concerns.

Chapter 5: China's platform-centered news ecosystem

We [platforms] are the seas, and news producers, depending on their sizes, are the rivers or streams. Rivers and streams flow to the seas
[my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

In an interview conducted in January 2018, my interviewee IE-11, senior executive of a major Chinese news platform, used the metaphors “seas” and “rivers or streams” to describe the relations between China’s digital media platforms and news producers, as shown in the above quotation. For my interviewee, this trend witnessed in China’s news industry—news producers and their content converging towards platforms—seems inevitable, just like rivers and streams flowing to the seas. While such inevitability may be doubted in the future or in other media contexts,³⁴ the rise of Chinese platforms in the news sphere in recent years has profoundly transformed China’s news environment. On the one hand, platforms are increasingly sitting at the centre of news processes, mediating news production, distribution and consumption. On the other hand, platforms are not only the mediators or intermediaries in today’s online world (Gillespie, 2018b), but have become the “gatekeepers” of news and information (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Helberger et al., 2015; Rosen, 2008; Vos, 2015).

As a result, China’s news environment in the platform era has become what I call a “platform-centered news ecosystem”. This news ecosystem has the following main features: (1) platforms are sitting at the centre, mediating and gatekeeping news production, distribution and consumption; (2) news sources are greatly diversified; (3) more interactions have been witnessed among various types of news actors. In this chapter, first, the phenomenon of Chinese platforms as converging sites for news production, distribution, and consumption processes will be examined. Then, how Chinese platforms influence news processes through their gatekeeping role will be investigated.

³⁴For instance, some global media brands like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have pulled out of the services of major platforms like Facebook Instant articles in recent years. See: <https://digiday.com/media/guardian-pulls-facebooks-instant-articles-apple-news/>

Last, the model that conceptualizes China’s news environment as a “platform-centered news ecosystem” will be introduced and discussed in relation to its implications for China’s public opinion control.

5.1 Platforms: converging sites for news processes

As this section will show, China’s news production, distribution and consumption is increasingly converging towards major platforms in the platform era. I argue that there are at least three reasons or driving forces behind this phenomenon. Firstly, platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao have become the primary news gateways for Chinese news consumers (People’s Daily Online, 2018d). Secondly, almost all Chinese major platforms have adopted a “native-hosting” strategy (see section 1.1), driving news producers to publish their content within platforms and leading to the diversification of news sources. Thirdly, the so-called “network effects” has further facilitated this converging trend and turned private platforms into China’s de-facto public information infrastructure.

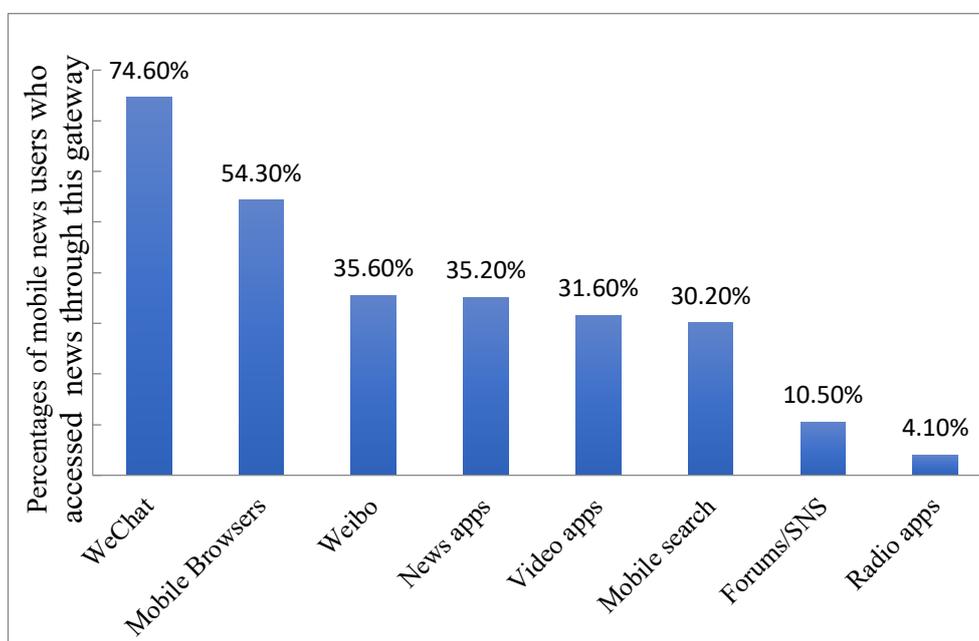
5.1.1 Platforms as primary news gateways

Driven by the popularity of social media (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) and a high take-up of mobile phones in China (see section 2.1.1), social media platforms and mobile news aggregators have become China’s primary news gateways. According to a survey conducted by CNNIC in early 2016, mobile phones have become the most used devices for Chinese Internet users to access news, and 90.7% online news users had accessed news through mobile phones during the last six months (CNNIC, 2017:12). As Figure 5.1 shows, among those mobile news users, the percentages of users who accessed news in the last six months through WeChat, Weibo, mobile browsers (e.g., UC browser), and mobile news apps (e.g., Toutiao and Tencent News) were 74.6%, 35.6%, 54.3% and 35.2% respectively (p.13)³⁵.

³⁵It is worth noting that this survey was conducted in 2016, the data may not be representational in China’s fast evolving mobile news market. For example, in recent years, major Chinese mobile browsers like UC browser have turned into mobile news aggregators, open to various types of content producers including news organizations and self-media. However, the trend shown in this survey—private platforms become the primary news gateways—is still true in today’s Chinese news market.

Such a trend—digital media platforms becoming the primary news gateways—has also been seen in many other media contexts in recent years. As the Digital News Report 2018, compiled by RISJ, shows, the majority (65%) of surveyed respondents in 37 markets³⁶ prefer to access news through a side door (such as search engines, social media, or news aggregators), rather than through news websites or news apps run by news organizations (Newman et al., 2018:13).

Figure 5.1: Most popular mobile news gateways in China (survey date: March 2016; data source: CNNIC)



One reason that platforms have become the primary news gateways around the world is that platforms provide added value to news consumers as the one-stop news sites. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) observe, on the one hand, news aggregators (e.g., Google News and Apple News) and social media platforms have unbundled content and audiences, providing direct access to individual news items. On the other hand, they have re-bundled news items in one location. As a result, platforms rather than the original news outlets have become the “prime gateway” for accessing news (p.52). China’s news market

³⁶The 37 media markets include European, North American, Asian, South American, and Oceanian markets.

has undergone a similar “unbundling” and “rebundling” process, although the party-state’s media policy has unexpectedly played a part in this process. As my interviewee IE-03 notes:

Since private platforms are not allowed to produce original news content, they aggregate news content from as many sources as possible [from both news websites and self-media]. Thus, compared to China’s official news websites, whose content is mainly limited to their own and some re-published pieces from other news outlets, private platforms enjoy great advantage as China’s one-stop news gateways [my translation].

—IE-03, editor-in-chief of a major news website, 2017

According to my interviewee IE-03, the state’s limitation on private capital regarding original news production (see section 2.2.3) has not affected, but may have contributed to, the success of private platforms as primary news gateways in China; in contrast, China’s official news websites have missed the opportunity of becoming China’s one-stop news gateways. In recent years, although some official news websites, including *People’s Daily Online*, have launched their open publishing services to compete with private platforms, the number of official accounts they host and the scale of their news consumers are not comparable to those of major private platforms.

While the Chinese party-state has expressed concerns about the challenges brought by private platforms regarding public opinion control (see chapter 1), it has rapidly adapted to the new situation and urged news organizations and state departments to utilize private platforms in engaging the public. The rationale behind this policy can be inferred from the following words of President Xi Jinping in 2015 (Xinhuanet, 2015):

Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda and news reports must extend their reach, and where the propaganda and thought work must focus on and put its foothold on [my translation].

That is to say, in the eyes of the party-state, since Chinese Internet users have moved to platforms, platforms have thus become the new “battlefields” for shaping public opinion. Therefore, news organizations and party/government departments should also establish their existence on platforms, and know better (or monitor), respond to, and guide public opinion through platforms (Xinhuanet, 2016). This is exactly the context of the earlier mentioned state-driven “WeChat, Weibo and One App” (WWOA) strategy, which urges news organizations and party/government departments to embrace major private platforms WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao to reach more audiences and engaging with the public. Partly due to this strategy, almost all Chinese news organizations and party/government departments have established their existence on major platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao.

Following the same rationale, in August 2014, a high-profile media strategy document, titled *Guideline on Facilitating the integrative development of Traditional Media and New Media* (关于推动传统媒体和新兴媒体融合发展的指导意见), was approved at the meeting of the CCP’s Central Leading Group for Overall Reform that was presided over by President Xi himself (People’s Daily Online, 2014a). According to the guideline, traditional media and new media must complement each other and their integration should involve content, channels, platforms, operations and management. While this media integration strategy mainly aims to expand the influence of news organizations in “ideological battlefield” (People’s Daily Online, 2015), it also officially recognized the importance of new media (including private platforms) in this integrative development process.

5.1.2 Native-hosting strategy of platforms

As discussed earlier (see section 1.1), an important feature of Chinese platforms is their open publishing services. Such services allow various types of actors (e.g., news organizations, self-media, state departments, companies, and institutions) to publish *within* their platforms, which is why they are also referred to as native-hosting services in this thesis. WeChat launched its native-hosting service, WeChat Official Accounts Platform, in 2012. Since

then, almost all Chinese major private online news providers, including news aggregator Toutiao and former online news portals like Sina, have launched similar services and thus turned themselves into open-publishing content platforms.

Platforms have their incentives for launching their native-hosting services. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) observe, this strategy is “attractive” to platforms because it keeps users on platforms, and thus allows platforms to collect and control user data and push their own advertising networks (p.60). For Chinese platforms, in addition to these obvious benefits, a native-hosting strategy also helps them to resolve potential copyright conflicts with news producers, as the latter now voluntarily publish content within platforms. For example, Toutiao disclosed in 2016 that more than 70% of the content circulated on its platform was produced within its Toutiaohao platform (Xinkuaibao, 2017). Before launching its Toutiaohao platform in 2014, Toutiao was involved in a number of high-profile copyright lawsuits with news organizations and private news portals like Sohu, which sued Toutiao for aggregating their content without seeking their consent and paying for the content (Xinkuaibao, 2017).

A direct outcome of the native-hosting services of platforms in China is the diversification of news sources on platforms. There are three main types of news sources or official accounts on Chinese platforms: news-media accounts (accounts run by news outlets), self-media accounts, and state accounts (政务号, accounts run by party or government departments at various levels). It is worth noting that this project focuses on news content and all these three types of accounts are considered as news sources, although a big proportion of content produced by them is not news (see section 1.1 for definition of “news” in this project). Almost all major platforms are hosting a great number of news producers of these three types. For example, as of September 2017, WeChat hosted 3.5 million monthly active official accounts run by various types of actors, and the number of monthly active users of official accounts reached 797 million (China Internet Watch, 2017). As of October 2017, the number of Toutiaohao accounts (similar to WeChat official accounts) reached over 1.1

million, and among them, the numbers of accounts run by individuals, news outlets, and institutions were more than 900, 000, 5, 500, and 70, 000, respectively (Chyxx, 2018). Such a situation means that China's news production and distribution are now increasingly carried out within and through platforms.

All the above-mentioned three types of news sources have established a prominent existence on platforms. As for news organizations, running official accounts on platforms has greatly expanded their audience reach. For example, *People's Daily* opened its official account on Weibo in 2012, which accumulated over 2.8 million followers in less than 4 months. As the annual Analysis Report on China's Online Public Opinion (People's Daily Online, 2012) commented:

Before the eve of the CCP's 18th National Congress [convened in November 2012], the followers of the official account of *People's Daily* on Sina Weibo had surpassed 2.8 million. This is an important moment, because the circulation of the 64-year-old newspaper is also 2.8 million [...]. This is a striking advance of the CCP's propaganda strategy, and it is like launching another *People's Daily* on Weibo [my translation].

In recent years, the followers (often called "fans" in China, emphasizing that they are voluntary followers or subscribers) of official media giants like *People's Daily* and *Xinhua news Agency* on platforms have expanded rapidly. As of September 2018, the followers of the official account of *People's Daily* on WeChat surpassed 20 million, making it the largest among news-media accounts (Ifeng, 2018a). Similarly, as of March 2018, the official account of *Xinhua* on WeChat had 15 million followers and a daily viewing number of 5 million (Guan, 2018). However, the expansion of followers on platforms does not necessarily translate into media influence, which will be further discussed in section 6.1.1.

The second major type of news source is self-media, which has become a

prominent news source that is often discussed together with news organizations in China. Based on survey data from Chinese third-party new media research companies (i.e., Newrank and Penguin Intelligence), Table 5.1 has summarized some basic features of self-media. According to the survey data, over half (58.7%) of self-media operators are media professionals (meaning they have working experience at news organizations) (Newrank, 2016). In other words, although self-media may not have the same level of editorial control as news organizations, a big proportion of self-media operators have undergone a certain degree of professional training in content production. At the same time, many popular self-media are restructuring themselves towards a more “professional” direction. For example, in terms of working mode, around half (49.2%) self-media works in a full-time mode, rather than only posting content on an occasional basis (Penguin Intelligence, 2017a). As for team size of self-media, although over half (54.9%) of self-media is run by only one single person, a big proportion of them (40.7%) are run by a small team of 2-5 persons and a very small proportion of them (4.4%) are run by a team larger than 5 persons (Penguin Intelligence, 2017a).

Table 5.1: Third-party survey results about China's self-media

	Status	Percentage	Data source and time
Working experience	Media professionals	58.7%	Newrank (May 2016)
	Non-media professionals	41.3%	
Content areas	News	40.8%	Newrank (May 2016)
	Non-news	59.2%	
Working mode	Part-time	50.8%	Penguin Intelligence (February 2017)
	Full-time	49.2%	
Team size	1 person	54.9%	Penguin Intelligence (February 2017)
	2-5 persons	40.7%	
	Over 5 persons	4.4%	

Self-media are now producing a big proportion of news content on Chinese platforms. The above-mentioned survey data show that around 40% of the content produced by self-media falls into the category of “news content” (Newrank, 2016). That is to say, although most content (59.2%) produced by self-media is not “news”, self-media still produce a great deal of news content. As discussed in section 2.2.3, only news outlets are allowed to produce original news in key areas (public affairs and breaking social incidents). As a result, a big proportion of news content produced by self-media is actually news commentaries on social issues and incidents. However, it is worth noting that even in the most-controlled areas, say, international current affairs, some popular self-media, such as *Niutanqin* (牛弹琴) and *Zhan Hao* (占豪), are still allowed to publish news commentaries on platforms. A possible explanation for such exceptions might be that the relevant self-media operators are pro-government. Among them, Liu Hong, the operator of *Niutanqin* (focusing on domestic and international current affairs), is the vice editor-in-chief of the official *Xinhuanet* and has long working experience for *Xinhua News Agency*. The operator of *Zhan Hao*, a financial freelancer and international affairs commentator, has been criticized by some online users as writing “patriotic” commentaries. In other words, the political values of self-

media have been taken into consideration by platforms when setting the publishing boundaries.

There are many similarities between China's self-media and bloggers in other media contexts. Prior studies conducted in the Western context have shown that top independent bloggers' readership can rival that of traditional media entities (Armstrong and Zuniga, 2006); they now hire editors, blog full-time, and even engage in investigative journalism acts (e.g., Meraz, 2009). However, China's self-media have their own characteristics. For example, they are mainly based on major digital platforms, and thus are subject to the distribution mechanisms (e.g., algorithms) and content values of platforms (e.g., click-pursuing, sharability).

In addition to news organizations and self-media, state accounts have been widely seen as one of the three main types of news sources in China. For example, during his speech at the 2018 China Online Media Forum, Ding Wei, director of the New Media Center of *People's Daily*, argued that the dominance of news organizations in China's news production had been challenged by state accounts and self-media (Ding, 2018c):

Information communication is undergoing transformation from the elite model dominated by professional news organization to the mass communication model. In terms of the production of new media content, the Chinese market has been "divided into three kingdoms [三分天下]": news organizations, state accounts, and self-media [my translation].

In recent years, state accounts on Weibo, WeChat and Toutiao have expanded rapidly and become an important channel for government departments to engage with the public. As of January 2016, there were over 100,000 state accounts on WeChat (Chinanews, 2016); as of December 2017, verified state accounts on Weibo and Toutiao have surpassed 134,000 and 70, 000 respectively (CNNIC, 2018). The existence of hundreds of thousands of state accounts on private platforms means that China's party and government

departments at various levels have established their own direct propagating channels through private platforms. By doing so, they can bypass news organizations and get their messages across directly to the public.

Driven by the party-state's WWOA strategy, it has become a "standard" procedure for government departments to release information and engage with the public through their official accounts on Weibo and WeChat during major events and breaking social incidents (People's Daily Online, 2014a; 2015). Sometimes, posts from state accounts, especially those run by central party or government departments, become the turning point of major incidents in China, as they are generally seen as representing the stance of the party-state. A prominent example is the "Zhao Wei event" (see section 2.1.1 for more details), in which the deletion of a post from the Weibo account run by the Communist Youth League (CYL) ignited the outrage of Internet users towards the power of private platforms.

However, the importance of state accounts in influencing public opinion should not be exaggerated. This is because these accounts mainly publish factual information or sometimes re-publish content from official news organizations, rather than produce news analysis or commentaries like news organizations or self-media. Therefore, in this thesis, when discussing China's changing media power structure in the platform era (see chapter 6), state accounts are not treated as a major news source that can rival news organizations and self-media in relation to shaping public opinion.

5.1.3 Network effects and public infrastructure

Another reason that Chinese platforms have become the converging sites for news processes is the so-called "network effects" (Rohlf, 1974). Here, the "network effects" of platforms include both "direct" and "indirect" effects (e.g., Haucap and Heimeshoff, 2014; Barwise and Watkins, 2018). Direct network effects imply that an increase in usage leads to a direct increase in value for other users (Katz and Shapiro, 1994). For instance, the more people use social media sites like Facebook and WeChat, the more valuable these networks become for their users. Indirect network effects (often referred to as

multi-sided markets) entail that the value to members of one market depends on the number of members in another market (Barwise and Watkins, 2018: 26-27). For example, the more end-users WeChat has, the more value WeChat can bring to other actors such as news producers and advertisers, and vice versa. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) observe, platforms function as multi-sided markets that connect end-users, advertisers, and third-party content producers, and thus make themselves “attractive or rather unavoidable” for advertisers and content producers due to their “strong network effects” (p.59).

Due to the above-discussed “network effects”, the number of major platforms in China (in other markets as well) has been limited, given that network effects lead to the “winner-take-all” features of digital markets (Barwise and Watkins, 2018:22-28). This is evidenced in the development of social media sites in China. Before the rise of Weibo and WeChat as China’s major social media platforms, China had hundreds and even thousands of social media sites. For example, when King et al. (2013) conducted research on China’s Internet censorship, they collected data from nearly 1,400 different social media services all over China. Such a decentralized situation was partly because, in the pre-platform era, almost all Chinese news websites maintained their own blogging, online forums and/or micro-blogging services. Currently, only a few such services, such as the Qiangguo Forum (强国论坛) run by *People’s Daily Online*, are still in full operation. The limited number of major platforms is very important for the party-state to exert effective control over the online world, which will be further discussed in chapter 8.

It is worth pointing out that, in addition to the “network effects”, the technological threshold required to run a major platform has also contributed to China’s news converging phenomenon. As Zhang Yiming, founder and CEO of Bytedance, commented in a media interview in 2014 (Wang, 2014):

There is a very high technological threshold for online mass content extraction and algorithmically recommendation. For this reason, the number of mobile content platforms with over 10 million [daily] users will be quite limited in the future [my translation].

The above “technological threshold” noted by Zhang Yiming is part of the reason why China’s most popular platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao) are all operated by major Internet companies such as Tencent, Alibaba, Sina, and Bytedance. In fact, when China’s official news organizations launched their own open platforms (meaning open to various news producers including self-media), they usually chose to cooperate with major Internet companies. For instance, *People’s Daily* launched its peoplehao platform in June 2018 with the technological support from Baidu, China’s dominant search engine (People’s Daily Online, 2018b).

Due to the above discussed reasons, private platforms have become the de-facto public infrastructure for news and information in China, as news producers—big or small; individuals, news organizations or state departments—cannot afford to stay away from these platforms. This is mainly because news producers rely on platforms to access their huge number of users. As Helberger et al. (2015) have found out, in terms of the influence of platforms as information gatekeepers, the real concern is not so much about their control over critical resources or access to information (as in the case of traditional gatekeepers); instead, “the real bottleneck is access to users” (p.50). This is exactly the main reason why all types of Chinese news producers, including news organizations, have to establish their existence on platforms. As my interviewee IE-13 observes:

Take a local newspaper as an example. If it does not post its content on *public* platforms [referring to platforms like WeChat], then it can only reach a very small audience, even if the quality of its content is good [my translation, emphasis added].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist of *Southern Weekend*, 2018

What is interesting in the above quotation is that my interviewee IE-13 called sites like WeChat as “public” platforms, suggesting that these private platforms are increasingly seen as public infrastructure for news and

information in China. In fact, there are rising debates in China about whether platforms, especially WeChat, should be seen as “Internet infrastructure” or “public goods” (e.g., Xiang, 2019). Similarly, in the West, major platforms such as Facebook, Google and Apple are increasingly referred to as the infrastructural services of society (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Plantin, Lagoze and Edwards, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

As China’s information infrastructure has long been dominated by state-owned companies or institutions (see section 2.2.2), private platforms becoming the de-facto public infrastructure for online news and information is a surprising development in authoritarian China. However, this situation is hardly an ideal or intended outcome for the party-state. So far, the party-state has not only invested in around a dozen central key news websites, including *People’s Daily Online* and *Xinhuanet*, but also in a state-owned search engine called Jike. Such efforts were described by Jiang (2012) as “state capitalism” (p.30). However, it has turned out that China’s official news websites can compete neither with commercial news portals like Sina nor today’s news aggregating platforms like Toutiao in terms of popularity and user scale. Similarly, the state-owned search engine Jike³⁷ could not compete with private search engines and its performance has been widely described by Chinese media and online users as a “fiasco”.

Partly due to the above-mentioned failures, the Chinese party-state has adapted to the reality: a digital media market dominated by private platforms. As a result, an interesting phenomenon is that performance data of news media accounts and state accounts on private platforms have become part of the criteria for evaluating the performance of official news organizations and party/government departments at various levels. Major platforms themselves and some Chinese new media research companies (e.g., Gsdata and Newrank) regularly release ranking lists concerning the performance of various types of official accounts (e.g., news-media accounts, state accounts and self-media accounts) on WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao. In recent years, private platforms

³⁷Jike merged with Pangu, a search service run by Xinhuanet, in 2014, and the merged search service was renamed Chinaso, which is jointly owned by a number of official news websites. Currently, Chinaso has a very small market share in China.

Toutiao and Weibo (often together with an official media or the Internet regulator) have also organized events and issued awards to government departments whose official accounts have performed well on these private platforms. A prominent example is the conference co-organized by Toutiao and China Internet Development Foundation in January 2017, which focused on the performance of state accounts and issued awards to state departments whose official accounts had performed well on Toutiao. According to the data released by Toutiao at the conference, in the year 2016, a total of 35,000 state accounts on Toutiao had published 2.4 million pieces of articles and videos. Among the articles published by state accounts, more than 500 pieces had a viewing number of over 1 million and some of them even over 10 million. At the conference, Toutiao issued awards to the operators of over 200 state accounts, run by government departments spanning the areas of public security, judicial system, civil affairs, and so on. This astonishing situation—Chinese private platforms issuing awards to party and government departments for their performance on platforms—has clearly demonstrated that major private platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao have become China’s de-facto public infrastructure for news and information.

5.2 Platforms as central news gatekeepers

As discussed in the above section, private platforms are increasingly sitting at the centre of China’s news processes. However, platforms are not merely mediators or intermediaries (e.g., Gillespie, 2018b), but gatekeepers of online news and information (e.g., Helberger et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2016). As discussed in section 3.2, one major difference between the gatekeeping power of platforms and traditional news organizations is that platforms mainly rely on algorithms to sort out content. Other than algorithms, platforms also exercise gatekeeping power through their designs, policies and human editors. This section examines how Chinese platforms have been influencing news processes through their algorithmic and non-algorithmic gatekeeping power.

5.2.1 Algorithmic gatekeeping of Chinese platforms

Algorithms are the most widely adopted content distribution mechanism for Chinese platforms, given that platforms have to “operate at scale” (Bell et al.,

2017:83). Inspired by the rocketing rise of the algorithm-based Toutiao in China's digital media market (see section 2.1.2), almost all Chinese major platforms have adopted algorithms, more or less, in their content distribution (Feng, 2017). While the algorithms of different Chinese platforms do not always share the same values, the main purposes of them are often quite similar: to satisfy the information demands and interests of users and to pursue more clicks. For example, as discussed in section 2.1.2, Toutiao claims that it records activities of users on its platform, based on which its algorithms infer users' interests and recommend content accordingly (Toutiao, n.d.-a).

The main influence of platform algorithms on news production is that news producers now have to tailor their content and working routines to the algorithms in order to reach a wider public. In the United States, such a situation has led Bell et al. (2017) to argue that platforms are “having a greater effect on American journalism than even the shift from print to digital” (p.1). In China, platform algorithms also have an obvious impact on news production. One example is the pursuing of “100,000+” articles (or videos) by Chinese news producers, especially self-media operators. The term “100,000+” originates from the design of WeChat: the platform displays viewing numbers that are bigger than 100,000 simply as “100,000+”. Since then, “100,000+” has become a special term and an important criterion for viral content in China, demonstrating the power of WeChat in setting the criteria for evaluating content value. Many Chinese self-media operators focus on how to write “100,000+” articles, rather than the quality of content. As my interviewee IE-3 observes:

It has become a special industry to train people to write “100,000+” articles. Such trainings often focus on how to produce appealing titles [...]. Without any first-hand investigation, some self-media operators can produce “100,000+” articles by simply carrying out some online searches [my translation].

—IE-3, self-media operator and former journalist of *People's Daily*, 2017

In fact, not only self-media; news production of Chinese news organizations has also been influenced by platform algorithms. As my interviewee IE-06 observes:

People's Daily seems to have “two faces”. Its traditional outlet stands high above the masses, but the topics, languages and tones of its official accounts on Weibo and WeChat are close to the ordinary public [...]. I noticed that some news consumers were so surprised by this that they even commented: “wow, this is from *People's Daily*!” [my translation]

—IE-06, senior editor of *Xinhua News Agency*, 2017

Apart from *People's Daily*, other official news organizations like *Xinhua News Agency* have adopted a similar strategy when reaching wider news consumers through platforms. For example, an editor from *Xinhua* claimed that, sometimes, a different title would turn a standard *Xinhua* newswire to a viral article on platforms (Guan, 2018):

Xinhua newswires are known for their seriousness and accuracy [within China]. However, such newswire-style reports are often not appealing to news consumers on WeChat. Thus, our editing team has to find a balance between “accuracy” and “appeal” when editing titles. Once we get it right, a *Xinhua* newswire can be a viral article [my translation].

The above two examples concerning *People's Daily* and *Xinhua* show that even China's official media giants have to change their topics or tones and strike a balance between accuracy and “appeal”. This strategy of China's state media giants may have indeed boosted their performance on major platforms like WeChat. A ranking list, compiled by the new media research company Newrank, showed that, in the year 2017, official accounts run by *People's Daily*, *CCTV News*, and *Xinhua* were the top three WeChat accounts in terms of performance indexes (based on data including the numbers of views and likes) (see Table 5.2). This shows that while the significance of China's

official media giants as major news sources has been diluted in the platform era (as news providers have been greatly diversified), these media giants still enjoy certain level of advantages compared to other news producers, such as brand awareness among news consumers, a reputation as authoritative news sources, and abundant resources to invest in new media operation. However, just like the numbers of followers of official accounts, such performance data do not necessarily translate into media influence, which will be discussed in section 6.1.

Table 5.2: Top 10 WeChat official accounts in 2017

Official account	Publishing times/ Number of articles	Total views/ average views	Total likes in millions	Operator type
People's Daily	2522/5809	580 million/ 99986	50.0	News organizations
CCTV News	2422/5334	490 million/ 87247	14.6	News organizations
Xinhua News Agency	2462/4606	350 million/ 69501	11.2	News organizations
People.cn	1824/6154	360 million/ 44581	2.7	News organizations
Zhan Hao	364/2908	280 million/ 98267	20.3	Self-media
CCTV Finance	1391/4416	360 million/ 76936	2.4	News organizations
Duhaoshu	365/2920	290 million/ > 100,000	21.0	Self-media
Youshu	365/2920	290 million/ 99944	13.3	Self-media
ChinaSo	890/3457	230 million/ 60667	3.0	Search service jointly launched by 7 central news organizations
Tiexue.net	358/2862	220 million/ 74613	3.0	Private portal website

Data source: Newrank (2018b).

Apart from its impact on news production, platform algorithms have also transformed news distribution. Algorithmic distribution has led to the “unbundling” of producer—content—audience configuration (Van Dijck et al., 2018). That is, news content is no longer consumed as a package (e.g.,

part of a newspaper), but “becomes a separate product standing naked in the marketplace” (Carr, 2008:154). In other words, in such a news environment, the competition between news content is based on the merits of individual news items, rather than a whole package. Similar situation has been witnessed in China, as an article from Tmtpost, a Chinese leading business and technology information provider, observes (Zhang, 2016):

Each piece of article is distributed through the algorithmic “black box”, which has completely undermined the concepts of media brand, media audience, and media curation. This is because media organizations no longer have their own stable audience [...]. They are “losing contact” with their audiences [...]. Thus, news organizations are becoming the “content workers” of platforms like Toutiao [my translation].

The above quote reflects the difficult situation that Chinese news organizations are facing—relying on platforms to distribute their content means they are losing their own audiences and brands, and thus become the “content workers” of platforms. This is a plight also faced by American news organizations. As Bell et al. (2017) note, publishing and distributing content on third-party platforms is like “building your house on someone else’s land” (p. 36); as a result, news producers are losing control over news distribution: whether certain content reaches certain people is often “at the mercy of the algorithm” of platforms (p.10).

While causing a plight for news organizations, this “unbundling” process is conducive to the rise of self-media in China. This is because in the platform era, self-media do not need to compete with news organizations on a package basis, but rather on a single piece basis. Therefore, the algorithmic distribution of platforms makes it possible for self-media, who do not have the same level of resources as news organizations, to compete robustly with professional news organizations for audiences and advertisement revenues in a platform environment.

Platform algorithms also bring profound implications for news consumption in China. The most obvious change is the personalization of news consumption, given that algorithmic distribution is generally based on the interests of news consumers (as shown in Toutiao’s algorithms). While personalized news consumption shaped by platform algorithms may have its advantages in tackling the “information overload” problem in the platform era and satisfying the interests of news consumers, it has stimulated debates around its negative effects, including the so-called “filter bubble” and “echo chamber” effects (see section 3.2) in China. The CCP’s central mouthpiece *People’s Daily* has been a prominent critic of the algorithms of private platforms. Since December 2016, the newspaper and its website *People’s Daily Online* have published a series of commentaries on platform algorithms. One of the commentaries, titled *When algorithms are prevalent, we need editors-in-chief more than ever*, argues (People’s Daily, 2016):

Algorithm-dominated distribution mechanism has created a “customized information” era [...], causing the “isolated island” effect [...]. A decentralized information distribution system has also led to more rumours [...]. In the algorithm-prevalent era, editors-in-chief and human gatekeepers [...] are needed more than ever [my translation].

According to the above excerpt, algorithmically personalized news consumption has raised concerns over the “isolated island” effect (similar to “filter bubble” and “echo chamber” effects)³⁸ and the increase of problematic content like rumours on platforms. The suggested solution is to require private platforms to have an editor-in-chief and fulfill their social responsibilities, as traditional news organizations do. It may not be a coincidence that, several months later, the *Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services* (PAINIS) (CAC, 2017a) took effect in China, which explicitly requires that all Chinese online news providers must have an editor-

³⁸Earlier empirical studies conducted in Western contexts have found no or only a small level of “filter bubble” or “echo chamber” effects (see section 3.2.1).

in-chief who has the overall responsibility of the content a platform hosts (article 11).

5.2.2 Non-algorithmic gatekeeping of Chinese platforms

As discussed in section 3.2, in addition to algorithms, platforms can also influence news processes through their designs, policies and human intervention. An important technical design of platforms is “datafication”, the ability of platforms to render user activities into data (Van Djick et al., 2018, see section 3.2.1 for more discussion). Due to this design, Chinese news producers now can adjust their content production according to audience metrics. For example, WeChat Official Accounts Platform provides news producers statistic data about: (1) their subscribers (e.g., demographic data like geographical distribution, age and gender; changes of subscriber numbers within certain time frame), and (2) each article (e.g., the numbers of views and shares; the channels through which users access the article). Obviously, such data are helpful for news producers to know more about their consumers and the performance of each article. Ma Ling, a former journalist from *Southern Metropolis* and the operator of a top self-media account *Mimeng*, claimed that viral articles could be manufactured through making good use of such audience metrics. Her methods include conducting interviews on a chosen topic within groups of subscribers and testing clicks on one hundred possible titles of an article within small groups before publishing the article to the wider public (Newrank, 2018a).

Different types of platforms—social media platforms and mobile news aggregating platforms—have very different designs. While algorithm is the main mechanism of content distribution for news aggregating platforms such as Toutiao, platform users and their social relations play a significant role in the gatekeeping mechanisms of social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo. According to a research report released by Host (a third-party hosting service for WeChat), in Q1 2017, the majority viewing (65.43%) of the content of WeChat official accounts came from users’ own subscription (Host, 2017). That is to say, on WeChat, users themselves play a major role in deciding what content they consume and thus become an important type of

gatekeepers, co-existing with other types of gatekeepers (WeChat itself is a big gatekeeper and news producers are another type of gatekeepers).

As for the influence of platform policies on news processes, a typical example is the limitation set by WeChat on how many times and how many pieces an official account can publish per day. According to WeChat policy, subscription-type official accounts generally can publish only once per day with the maximum of eight articles (WeChat, n.d.-b). According to the explanation from WeChat, the main purpose of this limitation is: (1) to maintain better content quality of official accounts, as news producers will be forced to choose only their best or most suitable content to publish on WeChat; (2) to ensure better user experience, as news consumers will not receive too many update notifications from their subscribed accounts and thus be less interfered (Tencent, 2016). In recent years, in response to the calls from news organizations, WeChat has granted more news media accounts the privilege of publishing a number of times per day, which has increased the publishing flexibility of news organizations, especially during breaking news events (Tan, 2017). Here, WeChat is clearly the rule-setter and its policy has an obvious impact on the working routines of news producers. That is, news producers have to adjust their routines and consider carefully *when* to publish and *what* to publish on WeChat, given the relevant limitations imposed by WeChat.

Chinese platforms also resort to their economic policies to influence news production. As my interviewee IE-11 discloses, Chinese platforms often use this method to encourage the production of certain types of content:

When we want more content of a certain type, say military stories, we normally adjust our CPM [cost of per 1000 clicks] of such stories to increase the motivation of news producers to publish more content in this area [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

Another example is the heavy investment of many Chinese platforms in live videos. For example, in 2016, Toutiao announced it would invest 1 billion

Yuan on individual short video creators.³⁹ The motivation for Toutiao to invest in short videos was clear: to attract more short video producers and thus to keep more users staying longer on its platform. This situation is similar to Facebook's payment to some major news organizations and independent influencers in 2016 to encourage them to produce more live videos on its platform (Jackson, 2016). These two examples demonstrate that through their economic stimuli, platforms are not merely aggregating the available content, but are playing an active role in influencing what content is available on their platforms.

Human editorial intervention is also an important gatekeeping mechanism of Chinese platforms under certain circumstances. For example, as Wu Chenguang, former editor-in-chief of Yidian Zixun (a mobile news aggregator), disclosed in a public speech in 2017 (Wu, 2017):

We use strong human intervention for significant events like the Communist Party's 19th National Congress [held in October 2017]. But for not very big events, we combine human intervention with algorithms in distributing news. For those non-political news or niche news, we normally don't intervene [my translation].

The above quote shows that, unlike Western platforms that have been reluctant in acknowledging human intervention in their content distribution (see section 3.3.3), some Chinese platforms are even keen to emphasize their human intervention (at least when addressing domestic audiences). This is because admitting such intervention is politically correct in China's context. As Wu acknowledged, human intervention was mainly used for political news, which, in practice, means prioritizing content produced by news organizations, given that only news organizations are entitled to gather and produce political news in China (see section 2.2.3). Therefore, human intervention of Chinese platforms regarding content distribution is often beneficial to the party-state's public opinion control.

³⁹Relevant news report can be accessed from: http://m.sohu.com/a/114723184_116897 (accessed 7 July 2019).

5.3 A platform-centered news ecosystem

Based on the empirical analysis of the above two sections, this section presents my own models about China's pre-platform and platform-era news flow structures. It argues that China's news environment has become a "platform-centered news ecosystem", with the following main features: (1) platforms sitting at the centre of news flow, mediating and gatekeeping news processes; (2) the diversification of news sources and perspectives; (3) more interactions among different types of actors. Compared to the pre-platform structure, this platform-centered news ecosystem is more open and less hierarchical, with individual news producers and news consumers enjoying more autonomy. Unsurprisingly, such an ecosystem has posed some challenges to the party-state's public opinion control.

5.3.1 Platform-centered news flow structure

Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3 are my models for the pre-platform and the platform-era news flow structure respectively. These two models describe news flow relations among the major news actors. In the pre-platform structure (see Figure 5.2), three main actors have been identified: news organizations, the Internet (such as online news portals like Sina.com, online forums, and etc.), and news audiences. Among them, news organizations and the Internet were the two major news providers, and news audiences received news content directly from them. During this period, news content provided by the Internet mainly originated from news organizations, given that private news providers were not allowed to produce news in key areas (see section 2.2.3) and thus they aggregated news from news organizations through copyright agreements. Moreover, on the Internet, news audiences produced a great deal of user-generated content, including interactions between users and interactions between users and news producers. While some user-generated content may be newsworthy, news audiences were not a main type of news producers in the pre-platform structure, as self-media are in the platform era.

Figure 5.2: China's pre-platform news flow structure

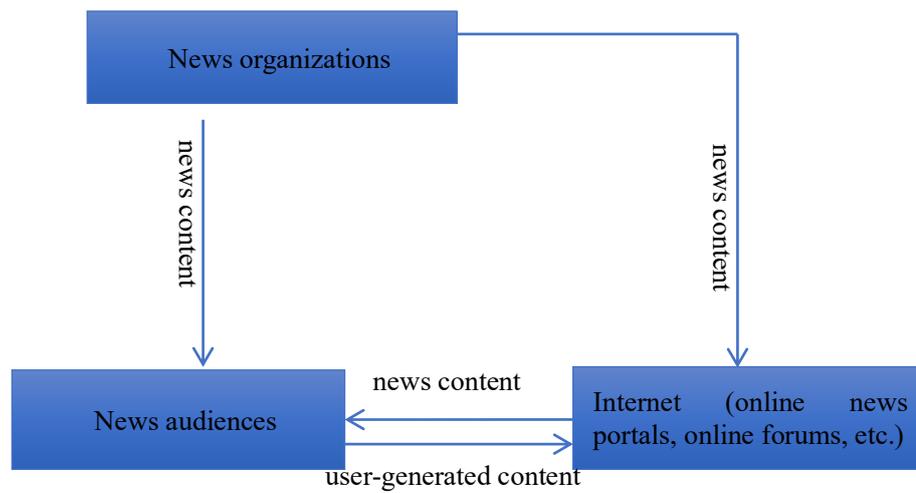


Figure 5.3: China's platform-era news flow structure

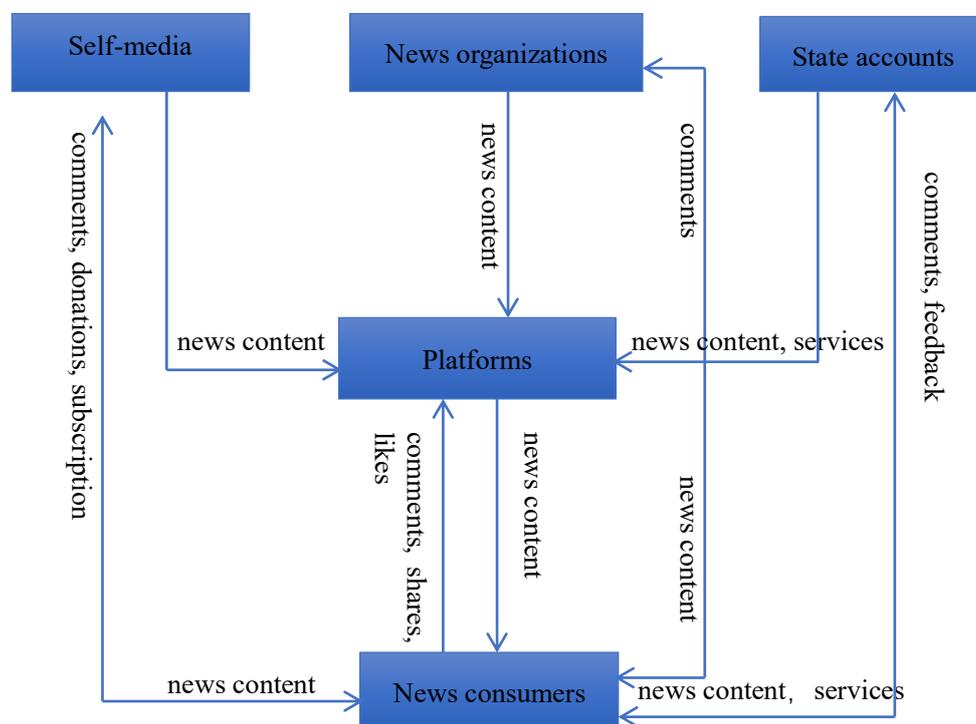


Figure 5.3 describes the news flow structure in the platform-era. Within this structure, five main actors have been identified: platforms, news organizations, self-media, the party-state (referring to state accounts) and news consumers. Compared to the pre-platform structure, this platform-era structure is much more complex with more actors included and more interactions among these actors. It has the following three distinct features:

(1) Platforms sitting at the centre

As illustrated in Figure 5.3, platforms are now sitting at the centre of China's news flow structure: all types of news producers (namely, news organizations, self-media and state accounts) are publishing and distributing content within platforms, and they are engaging with news consumers through platforms. Of course, in the platform era, news organizations can still reach news consumers through their own channels, albeit often on a smaller scale. Not only mediating China's news processes, platforms also exercise gatekeeping power over news producers and consumers through their algorithmic or non-algorithmic mechanisms, and thus become the central control points of online news and information in China (as discussed in section 5.2). Such a position of platforms has significant implications for China's public opinion control, as discussed in the next sub-section.

(2) News sources greatly diversified

In the pre-platform era, news production was dominated by news organizations, although private news providers did produce original news in areas such as sports and entertainment. In contrast, as illustrated in Figure 5.3, in addition to news organizations, self-media and state accounts have risen as the other two major types of news and information producers in the platform era, leading to a great diversification of news sources. In other words, news consumers now have many more choices regarding news content, given that there are millions of official accounts on platforms. For various types of news producers including individual authors, companies, and even government departments, platforms provide a more open publishing space and help them to bypass the traditional gatekeeping process of news organizations. Meanwhile, as news consumers can subscribe to any channels, topics, or

official accounts at their own choices on platforms, they are playing an active role in curating their own news feeds. This is why the more passive “news audiences” in the pre-platform era have turned into “news consumers” in the platform era.

(3) More interactions among actors

In the pre-platform era, the relations between news organizations and audiences were mostly unidirectional in China⁴⁰, though audiences did participate actively in online discussion about issues and incidents of public concern through the Internet (e.g., Jiang, 2010; Yang, 2011). In contrast, in the platform era, news consumers interact with all other actors in a robust way. As illustrated in Figure 5.3, news consumers are participating in online discussion on platforms through activities such as commenting, liking, and sharing, and they also directly interact with all types of news producers—news organizations, state departments and self-media—within official accounts that they have subscribed to. It is worth noting that the interactions between news consumers and news providers are more complex than in the pre-platform era, as news consumers can now influence news production through making payments to news producers in the form of tips (or donations) and subscriptions. Apart from advertising revenues, direct payments from news consumers are an important income source for news producers, especially self-media operators.

Based on the above discussion, I argue that China’s news environment has become a platform-centered news ecosystem. Here, the word “ecosystem”, defined by Dictionary.com as “any system or network of interconnecting and interacting parts”,⁴¹ emphasizes that this platform-era news environment is more open, autonomous, and with more interactions among actors within this system.

5.3.2 Some platform-era public opinion challenges

⁴⁰After an initial open period, news websites run by Chinese news organizations usually did not allow user comments, partly because of the difficulty in moderating user comments.

⁴¹See the definition of “ecosystem”: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ecosystem>.

Some challenges regarding the party-state's public opinion control have arisen with the above-discussed news transformation in the platform era. First, with platforms sitting at the centre of China's news ecosystem, the online public opinion "battlefields" have moved from state-controlled news organizations and online news portals to major private platforms. As the annual Analysis Report on China's Online Public Opinion observes (People's Daily Online, 2015):

Regarding China's public opinion field in 2015, the agenda-setting capacity of traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and television has further declined. Meanwhile, the WWOA (Weibo, WeChat and mobile news apps) have become the primary news gateways for many Chinese people. WeChat and QQ,⁴² in particular, have become the new engines of China's social public opinion [my translation].

The above change of "battlefields" requires the party-state to make corresponding adjustment with its public opinion control strategies. Moreover, as section 5.2 has shown, Chinese platforms are more than only being the "battlefields" for public opinion control, they have been exercising gatekeeping power over news production, distribution and consumption and become the central control points of online news and information. In other words, privately owned platforms are a crucial news actor regarding China's public opinion control. How the party-state adapts to this situation will be discussed in chapter 6 and chapter 7.

The second major challenge arising in the platform-centered news ecosystem mainly relates to the diversification of news sources. This is because with more diverse news sources, especially the rise of self-media, news consumers can now access much more diverse opinions and perspectives. As my interviewee IE-04 comments:

⁴²QQ is another popular social media platform owned by Tencent. Different from WeChat, whose users cover all age groups; QQ is popular especially among young people.

I sometimes read commentaries or opinions from self-media, but basically don't get [factual] news from them. Instead, I access news mainly from authoritative news outlets [my translation].

—IE-04, vice director of a major radio news channel, 2017

The above quotation shows that, even for a senior media professional who does not trust the content from self-media, self-media are still an important source for news commentaries and opinions. Sometimes, content (such as politically sensitive content) from self-media can be challenging to the party-state. As my interviewee IE-06 observes:

When a major incident happens, self-media voices, whether being accurate or not, are often shared widely on social media. This is because sometimes traditional media are not allowed [by media regulators] to voice their opinions or set themselves a “red line”, while self-media are often bolder in voicing their opinions and hold views closer to the ordinary public [my translation].

—IE-06, senior editor at Xinhua News Agency, 2017

The above situation—self-media being bolder in voicing their opinions and often expressing different opinions from news organizations— is obviously worrying for news organizations and the party-state. It is exactly the context why the official account *Xiakedao*, affiliated with the *People's Daily*, voiced concerns over the disruption brought by self-media in terms of public opinion control, given that the “guerrilla” (referring to self-media) may outperform the “real army” (referring to news organizations) in terms of shaping public opinion (see section 1.1 for the complete quotation).

The third main challenge brought by this platform-era news environment concerns platform algorithms, which have led to the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours on platforms. As discussed in section 5.2, to be able to “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017b), both Chinese news organizations and self-media operators have to tailor to the click-pursuing algorithms of platforms, leading to the production of more click-pursuing

content. At the same time, platform algorithms have transformed news consumption in China, and algorithmically personalized news consumption means more human-interest content, including vulgar content and rumours are now consumed by platform users. This situation has drawn attention to the negative effects of platform algorithms in China. How the party-state tackles content regulation challenges (mainly politically sensitive content, vulgar content and rumours) will be discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has examined the influence of platforms on China's news flow structure. Such influence is mainly embodied in two aspects. The first aspect is that Chinese platforms have become the converging sites for news consumers, news producers, and news content, and thus sitting at the centre of news processes. The second aspect concerns the gatekeeping power of platforms, which influence news production, distribution and consumption through their gatekeeping mechanisms such as algorithms, designs, policies and human intervention. Based on such discussion, this chapter has presented my model for China's platform-era news flow structure and argued that this structure can be called the "platform-centered news ecosystem".

This chapter has arrived at the conclusion that platforms have transformed China's news processes in a profound way, with platforms now becoming the central control points of China's online world and the diversification of news sources. It has further argued that, compared to the pre-platform news environment, this platform-centered news ecosystem is more open and autonomous, in that individual authors and news consumers now enjoy more autonomy. This chapter has also identified a number of challenges this platform-era news ecosystem brings to the party-state, including the change of public opinion battlefields, the diversification of opinions and perspectives available on platforms, and the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours. The response of the Chinese party-state to these challenges will be examined in chapters 6-7.

Chapter 6: China's changing media power structure

Without WeChat, self-media operators like us cannot start our businesses [...]. It is groundbreaking and revolutionary. It is true empowerment [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist of *Southern Weekend*, 2018

Introduction

Media power is a crucial issue in China (in democracies as well), because it concerns the party-state's public opinion control, which in turn links to the party-state's legitimacy of staying in power (see section 2.2.4). In addition to having transformed China's news processes (as discussed in chapter 5), platforms have also brought about obvious changes to China's media power structure. This chapter will show that one prominent change is the rise of self-media as an important news actor in China, which, in the eyes of my interviewee IE-13, is a "groundbreaking and revolutionary" development and "true empowerment" for individual content producers. At the same time, the media power of news organizations has seen a relative decline in the platform era. Such a power shift has challenged the Chinese party-state's pre-platform model of public opinion control, which mainly relies on state-controlled news organizations to guide public opinion (the "softer" part) and media regulators to exercise more coercive control (the "harder" part) (see section 2.2.4). Moreover, platforms themselves have become crucial news actors: not only empowering or disempowering other actors, but also influencing public agenda directly.

As a response to the changing media power structure, the party-state has been adjusting its strategies of public opinion guidance. This chapter argues that, apart from strengthening news organizations, it has incorporated private platforms into its system of public opinion guidance, and tried to utilize all possible resources (e.g., self-media opinion leaders and patriotic Internet users). In this chapter, I first examine how platforms have caused a media power shift in China, mainly the relative decline of news organizations and

the rise of self-media as an important news actor. Secondly, I present a model of China's media power structure in the platform era, based on which I examine how the party-state has been adapting its system of public opinion guidance. It is worth noting that, in addition to the adjustment in public opinion guidance, the party-state's public opinion control in the platform era also involves the adjustment in its Internet governance framework, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

6.1 Platform-caused media power shift

This section discusses how platforms have caused a power shift in China's news sphere. It argues that, while providing new ways and channels for news organizations to engage with the public (see section 5.1.2), platforms have disempowered news organizations in profound ways. In contrast, despite imposing some limitations on self-media, platforms have greatly empowered self-media as an important news actor. However, the disempowering of news organizations and the empowering of self-media by Chinese platforms are not absolute. As this section will show, news organizations are still the more trusted news sources than self-media in China. Moreover, while platforms have provided various content-monetization (meaning earning money from producing content) ways for self-media and thus enhanced their economic autonomy, they may have also weakened the expression autonomy of popular self-media operators and discouraged them from covering political topics.

6.1.1 News organizations relatively disempowered

Chinese platforms have disempowered news organizations mainly in three areas. Firstly, by transforming media practices and challenging established journalism values, such as accuracy and objectivity, platforms have downgraded the credibility of professional news organizations. Secondly, platforms have unbundled the triangular content-audience-advertising configuration (Van Dijck et al., 2018), and further undermined the business models of news organizations. Thirdly, platforms have contributed to the exodus of many experienced media professionals in recent years, and thus have weakened the capacity of news organizations in content production (such as in the area of investigative reports).

Credibility of news organizations downgraded

As discussed in section 5.2, to appeal to news consumers on platforms, many Chinese news organizations have adjusted their topics and use of language and made them closer to the ordinary public when publishing on third-party platforms. While such adjustment does help some news organizations, especially official media giants like *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*, to attract large numbers of followers and clicks (see chapter 5), a wider audience reach does not necessarily translate into media influence or media trust. As Cui Shixin, a senior manager from *People's Daily*, comments during a media interview, in terms of enhancing the credibility of official news organizations, what really matters is still the quality of reporting (Tang and Tao, 2018):

Some people advocate that media professionals from party-media must know two systems of language [in order to gain more viewing or more followers]: one is for traditional media, and the other is for new media [...]. Why can't we just use one language? [...] When you are really professional, the audiences will, of course, trust you [my translation].

It is worth mentioning that compared to China's official media giants like *People's Daily*, most marketized news organizations have many fewer followers on platforms. This may be partly due to the fact that official media giants have more resources and their content is often prioritized on platforms (see next section). In contrast, marketized news media are caught in the dilemma between publishing their content for free on third-party platforms (and thus damaging their economic revenues), and reaching a wider audience through platforms, a plight also seen in Western media context (e.g., Bell et al., 2017). This situation may not be conducive to the party-state's public opinion guidance, as prior studies have concluded that China's marketized media enjoy a higher level of credibility than official media (Gang and Bandurski, 2011; Stockmann, 2013).

As discussed in Chapter 5, Chinese news organizations now have to tailor their content production to the mechanisms of platforms, especially click-pursuing algorithms, which may cause damage to the credibility of news organizations. As my interviewee IE-04 comments:

If news organizations cannot refuse the temptation of clicks, they would lose their credibility and influence. As a news organization, we have our social responsibilities to fulfill and our bottom line to stick to [...]. Otherwise, we will become ordinary and go towards vulgarization [my translation].

—IE-04, vice director of a major radio news channel, 2017

The above comment shows that Chinese media professionals are concerned about the impact of platforms on the credibility of news organizations and they are clear that, to maintain the media influence of news organizations, news organizations have to fulfill their social responsibilities. In China's context, the social responsibilities of news organizations are linked to the so-called journalistic professionalism, of which "serving the public" is a core element (see section 2.2). Similar concern about the negative effects of platforms on the future of news organizations has been voiced by another interviewee IE-03:

For those market-oriented news organizations, they will pursue more clicks and produce more content of human interest [...]. You see, each country needs mainstream media like *The New York Times* or *The Times*, but platform algorithms will lead to the direction of *The Sun* [my translation].

—IE-03, editor-in-chief of a major news website, 2017

Obviously, news organizations like *The Sun* have their audiences and values for the society. What my interviewee IE-03, who might have unconscious prejudice towards The-Sun-style journalism (with more celebrity coverage and sensational stories), tried to say is that serious journalism that is of significant public values may be squeezed out by platform algorithms in

China.

Some Chinese media professionals have publicly expressed their concerns over the decline of serious journalism and the credibility of news organizations. Chen Jibing, a Chinese senior news editor with around 30 years of working experience in the news industry, claims that “Real journalism is dying” in China (Chen, 2018a). Here, what Chen calls “real journalism” refers to news reports and in-depth analysis about news events of significant public interest. In this widely shared article, Chen gave two examples to show that “real journalism” was facing a crisis in China. One example was about the epidemic flu in the spring of 2018 that caused substantial casualties in China. To his surprise, almost no Chinese news outlets had produced any detailed reports, let alone first-hand investigative reports about the flu. Another example was the collision of an Iranian tanker with a Chinese cargo ship in the East China Sea (within China’s territorial waters) in January 2018 that led to over 30 sailors going missing and a massive oil leak. Shockingly, except for a few Chinese news outlets like *Caixin Weekly*, the rest of Chinese news outlets did not publish any reports on such a significant incident.

In the eyes of Chen, this deplorable situation in the news sphere was the result of a declining Chinese traditional news industry in a new media era. Historically, Chinese traditional media (especially marketized newspapers like *Southern Metropolis* and *Southern Weekend*) had developed a tradition of investigative journalism and exposed a great deal of wrongdoings of local governments and officials (e.g., Repnikova, 2017; Tong and Sparks, 2009). However, since the 2000s (especially in recent years), investigative journalism has seen a decline in China (e.g., Tong and Sparks, 2009), partly due to the rise of new media. This is because new media, such as online news portals and platforms, have disrupted the business models of traditional news organizations and facilitated the exodus of experienced media professionals, which will be discussed below.

Business models further disrupted

One major reason behind the above-discussed plight of Chinese news

organizations is that its advertising-based business model has been further challenged in the platform era. This is actually a global story. As Van Dijck et al. (2018) explain, since the 1990s, news aggregators like Yahoo News, search engines like Google, and classified websites have posed great challenges to news organizations in terms of advertising revenues. The rise of infrastructural platforms like Facebook has further threatened the business models of news organizations, as the “content-audience-advertising configuration” has been “unbundled” by platforms (p.53) (see chapter 5 for more discussion on the “unbundling” and “rebundling” processes in the platform era). Thus, news organizations increasingly lose control over content distribution and monetization (Nielsen and Ganter, 2017).

In recent years, the contrasting advertising revenue change, that is, the revenue rise of Internet companies and the revenue decline of news organizations, has been seen both in Western and Chinese news markets. For instance, in the UK in 2016, Google and Facebook took over 70% of all digital advertising spending; while in the US in 2017, the share of these two Internet giants was over 63%. In China, although the digital advertising share of major Chinese platforms and their parent companies is not comparable to that of Google and Facebook, the advertising revenues of Internet companies have witnessed a rapid rise in recent years. According to the Top 30 Global Media Owners (by advertising revenue) report released by Zenith in 2017, China had three media owners on the list: Baidu (ranking the 4th), Tencent (ranking the 14th), and China Central Television (ranking the 20th) (China Daily, 2017). The report also showed that during the period between 2012 and 2016, Tencent and Baidu saw their advertising revenues soar by 697 percent and 190 percent respectively. That is to say, Chinese Internet giants Tencent and Baidu have not only become major players in terms of advertising revenue in the world, they have also outperformed any Chinese media organizations. Similarly, Bytedance witnessed a rapid increase in its advertising revenue from 6 billion Yuan in 2016 to 15 billion Yuan in 2017 (China Business, 2018). In contrast, according to the annual report on the development of China’s media industry, in the year 2017, the total advertising revenue of all print media in China (newspapers, magazines, and books) was less than 15 billion

Yuan, the same advertising revenue of Bytedance in the same year (Cui, 2018). In addition to Internet companies, self-media have also grabbed a share of China's digital advertising spending, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

While undermining the advertising revenue of most news organizations, platforms do offer news organizations some remedies. In the West, most major platforms like Facebook and YouTube have offered to share advertising revenues with news organizations. Moreover, while Facebook and Google have been blamed for undermining the advertising revenue of news organizations, both of them have established projects supporting journalism in recent years (i.e., Facebook Journalism project; Google News Initiative). However, such revenues are generally much less than news organizations used to get from advertisers (e.g., Bell et al., 2017). In China, as my interviewee IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, discloses, most platforms only share advertising revenues with popular self-media, rather than news organizations, most of which provide their content for free in exchange for traffic referrals from platforms. The economic remedy Chinese platforms provide to news organizations is content copyright payments. However, only a small proportion of news organizations can get such payments. As my interviewee IE-04, vice director of a major radio news channel, notes, to his knowledge, only official media giants like *Xinhua News Agency* and some influential local news brands like *Beijing News* (新京报) and *The Paper* (澎湃新闻) are certain to receive copyright payments from platforms. That is to say, for a Chinese news organization, whether it can get copyright payments from platforms depends on how many chips they hold when negotiating with platforms. In other words, the economic relations between platforms and news organizations reflect the power relations between them.

With their traditional business model being further disrupted, many news organizations around the world are trying to establish their subscription-first model. In China, only very few media brands have started to try the subscription model. *Caixin.com*, a Chinese news brand focusing on original

financial news and investigative reporting, established its paywall since November 2017 and became China's first subscription-only news outlet (Yan, 2017). According to the July 2019 Digital Subscription Snapshot released by FIPP (a network for global media), the accumulated number of individual subscribers of *Caixin.com* had surpassed 200, 000, which made it the 12th biggest news outlet on the global digital subscription list in terms of the scale of subscribers (FIPP, 2019).⁴³ In some markets, such paid-reading trend is more promising. For example, the US news market saw a 7 percent increase in subscription in 2017, led by *The New York Times*⁴⁴ and *The Washington Post* (Neuman et al., 2018). The rise of reader payments in recent years has been hailed as “signs of hope for the news industry” and the importance of higher content quality (Nieman et al., 2018: 9). However, it seems that this subscription model may only suit major media brands (Neuman et al., 2018).

The exodus of media professionals

In recent year, an exodus of media professionals has been witnessed in China, another signal that Chinese news organizations have been disempowered in the platform era. Among those who have left news organizations, many are former executives and well-known journalists or TV presenters. This phenomenon has drawn great attention within China's media industry and among media academics (e.g., Chen and Zhang, 2016; Wang, 2015). My interviewee IE-10 has personally witnessed this exodus of media professionals:

Many of my former colleagues have left the newspaper in recent years. *Southern Metropolis Weekly*⁴⁵ has around 10 editors and journalists when I left *Southern Metropolis* in 2014. But now, it has just one editor and one full-time journalist. The Weekly was also

⁴³On the same list, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* were the biggest three paid-for news media, with 3.5 million, 1.8 million, and 1.2 million subscribers respectively.

⁴⁴The New York Times raised over \$1 billion of subscription revenue in 2017 (more than its advertising revenue), and its stated business goal is to become “the most successful digital subscription business in the world”. See: The New York Times Company 2017 Annual Report. [online] Available from: https://s1.q4cdn.com/156149269/files/doc_financials/annual/2017/Final-2017-Annual-Report.pdf (Accessed 8 July 2019).

⁴⁵*Southern Metropolis Weekly* is affiliated with *Southern Metropolis*, a well-known daily based in Guangzhou, capital city of China's southern province Guangdong.

changed to a fortnightly [my translation].

—IE-10, former journalist of *Southern Metropolis*, 2018

The fate of *Southern Metropolis Weekly* is just a miniature of China's traditional news organizations. In researching the factors that have caused this exodus, Chen and Zhang (2016) point to four main reasons: (1) lack of journalistic freedom; (2) the rise of new media; (3) gloomy economic future of news organizations; (4) personal career planning. As for the first reason, my interviewee IE-15 provides a personal account about why she left the newsroom of *China Central Television*:

We were able to choose different paths to achieve our goal in news reporting, as long as we operated within the “red lines”. However, in recent years, such freedom [in news reporting] declined [...]. People were too concerned about being politically correct [...]. I couldn't feel the fulfillment I used to get from my work [my translation].

—IE-15, former senior editor of *China Central Television*, 2018

Except for the decline of journalistic freedom, the other three reasons are all related to a platform-centered news environment, which has not only further undermined the traditional business model of news organizations, but also cast a shadow on the personal careers of media professions. In fact, many former media professionals are now working for platforms or Internet companies (Wang, 2015). This is because, compared to news organizations, platforms and Internet companies seem to be more attractive employers, at least in the sense of economic revenues. As my interviewee IE-13 observes:

You know, Internet companies often provide much higher salaries to media professionals. When the journalists are gone, investigative reporting is gone [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist of *Southern Weekend*, 2018

Apart from working for Internet companies and platforms, a big proportion

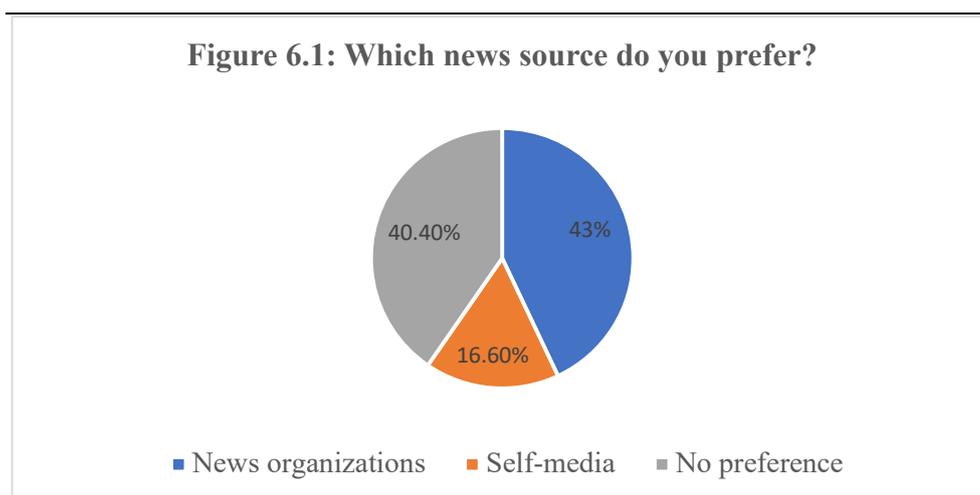
of former media professionals, including my interviewee IE-13, who left her position at *Southern Weekend* in 2013, have become self-media operators in China. That is why, according to a survey conducted by Newrank in 2016, over half (58.7%) of the surveyed self-media operators had working experience at news organizations (see section 5.1.2 for more discussion). In other words, the exodus of Chinese media professionals not only signals the relative decline of news organizations in China, but also serves as part of the explanation for the rise of self-media as an important news actor, which will be discussed next.

6.1.2 Self-media empowered as an important news actor

The rise of self-media as an important news actor has been a prominent phenomenon in relation to China's changing media power structure. This subsection argues that platforms have empowered self-media in multiple ways, including making self-media a major news source, de-facto independent media businesses, and online opinion leaders on platforms. However, the capacity of self-media in shaping public opinion, especially in political areas, is limited, given that they are now subject to both political and economic pressure in China's media context.

Self-media as a major news source

According to a survey conducted by Penguin Intelligence in 2018 concerning the preference of news sources (see Figure 6.1), although 43% of the surveyed Chinese news consumers still prefer news organizations to self-media, up to 40.4% of news consumers have no preference regarding these two types of sources. The survey also shows that 16.6% of the sampled news consumers even prefer self-media to news organizations (Penguin Intelligence, 2018). That is to say, overall, while news organizations are still the preferred type of news sources for news consumers, self-media have already become a major type of news source in China.



Data Source: Penguin Intelligence (2018.04)

Some very popular self-media accounts have a scale of followers that can rival, and even surpass, that of major news organizations. For example, as of January 2018, the top self-media account *Mimeng* had more than 14 million followers on WeChat (China Youth Daily, 2019). This number is much bigger than the circulation of any Chinese newspaper⁴⁶, or the number of followers of most media accounts or state accounts on platforms. As Liu Hong, vice editor-in-chief of *Xinhuanet* (新华网) and the operator of a popular self-media account *Niutanqin*, observed during an interview (NewMedia, 2016):

If you [referring to self-media] have hundreds of thousands of followers and if you also produce original content, then [the influence of] your account amounts to a local newspaper; and if you have over one million followers, then it reaches the level of a national major newspaper [my translation].

As discussed earlier, the scale of followers does not necessarily mean media influence. However, it does provide an important metric to evaluate how wide self-media accounts can reach and their potential in shaping public opinion. It is worth noting that while there are very popular self-media accounts, most self-media operators just have a moderate (e.g., thousands) or a very small number (e.g., hundreds or dozens) of followers. According to a research

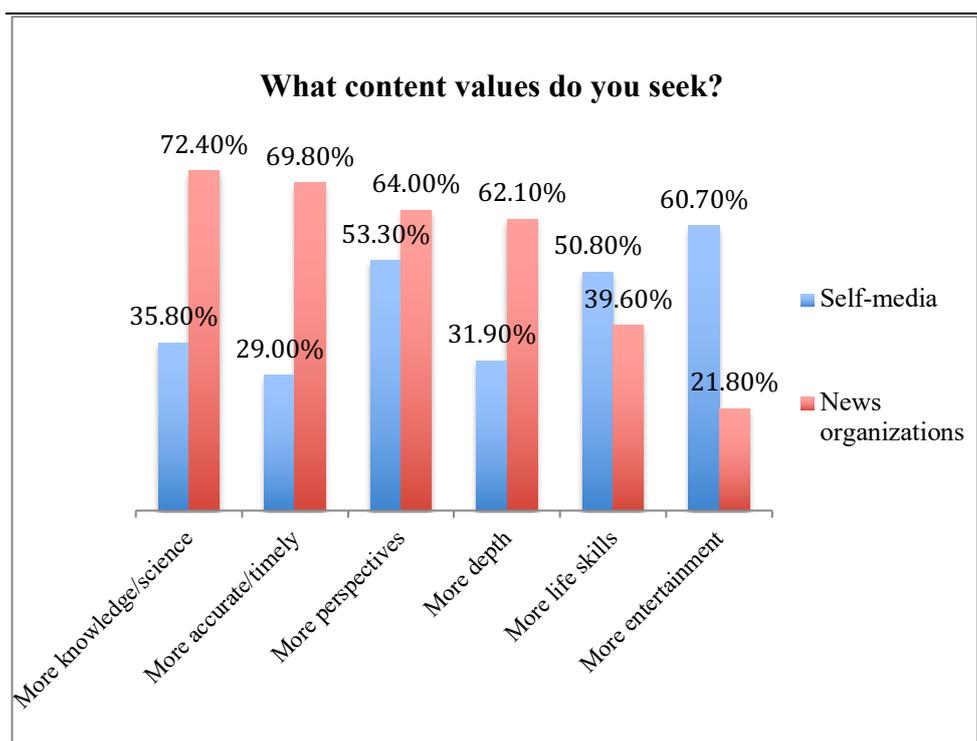
⁴⁶*Cankao Xiaoxi* (参考消息), a newspaper affiliated with *Xinhua News Agency*, has a circulation of 3 million, the biggest among all Chinese newspapers.

report from Penguin Intelligence in 2017, only 1.8% of the over 9,000 sampled self-media accounts had over one million followers; 76.1% of them had less than 10,000 followers (Penguin Intelligence, 2017b).

Apart from the scale of followers, other variables like views, likes and comments are also among the main factors in evaluating the potential media influence of self-media. According to the statistical data of Newrank (see Table 5.2), among the top ten WeChat official accounts in terms of performance in 2017, five of them were run by major news organizations like *People's Daily* and three by self-media (Newrank, 2018b). In other words, the performance of some self-media accounts is even comparable to that of official accounts run by China's central media giants.

However, it is necessary to note that, compared to self-media, news organizations are still the more trusted news sources in China. According to Penguin Intelligence (2018), news consumers are seeking different content values from self-media and news organizations (see Figure 6.2). For Chinese news consumers, self-media content is more linked to life skills and entertainment, while news organizations content is more associated with knowledge, accurate and timely information, and depth in content. However, the disparity between news organizations (64%) and self-media (53.3%) regarding the content value of "more perspectives" is relatively small, meaning that news consumers value the diversified perspectives from self-media.

Figure 6.2: Content values news consumers seek from news sources



Data source: Penguin Intelligence (2018).

Self-media as independent media businesses

Apart from sharing advertising revenue with self-media, Chinese platforms provide several ways for self-media to monetize their content, including sponsored articles; voluntary donations from readers; operating e-commerce within accounts; and paid reading or subscription (see Table 6.1). It is reported that the price for a sponsored article on popular self-media is usually between 100,000-300,000 Yuan; but for the top self-media *Mimeng*, the price was 800,000 Yuan per article in 2018 (China Business, 2019), which is several times the average annual salary of Chinese.⁴⁷ As shown in the following Table (see Table 6.1), many self-media (17%) have made stable profits through running official accounts on platforms. That is why self-media are often referred to as “content entrepreneurship” (内容创业) in China.

⁴⁷For example, the average annual salary in Beijing in 2018 was around 94,000 Yuan. See: <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2019-05-31/doc-ihvhiqay2722377.shtml> (Accessed 8 July 2019).

Table 6.1: Content entrepreneurship of China's self-media

	Status	Percentages	Data source/date
The status of income	No income	46.5%	Newrank (May 2016)
	Making stable profits	17%	
	Having unstable or non-profitable income	36.5%	
Sources of income ⁴⁸	Advertisement (ad-sharing or sponsored articles)	88.8%	Penguin Intelligence (February 2017)
	Users donations	14.3%	
	E-commerce	9.1%	
	Paid reading	4.5%	
	Others	15.7%	
Motivations for running self-media	Making money	51%	Newrank (May 2016)
	Gaining popularity	18%	
	Personal interest	28.5%	
	Others	2.5%	

Other than the above ways of monetizing content, top or niche self-media have also attracted substantial venture capital investments in recent years. For example, in the year 2016, the venture capital investment on self-media was over 2.1 billion Yuan in total, with dozens of self-media having received millions, tens of millions and even a hundred million Yuan (Penguin Intelligence, 2017a).⁴⁹

Content entrepreneurship is a key characteristic of self-media. As an American marketing specialist observes, China's self-media are different from the traditional blogs because they have more ways of content monetization (McCloskey, 2017). An article from *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2018 echoed this observation, which argues that the key difference between today's self-media and the first-generation self-media (e.g., blogs, podcasts and Weibo posts) is their economic autonomy. The article notes, before the rise of platforms such as WeChat, most individual writers could not gain followers to the critical levels necessary to make a living, thus their

⁴⁸Here, self-media without any income have been excluded.

⁴⁹One example is that, in March 2016, the viral video star *Papi Jiang*, who posted amusing videos focusing on a wide range of social issues, received 12 million Yuan in investment. Available from: <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1354/news-buzz-to-biz-i-the-rise-of-chinas-new-media-content-makers>

content production remained a “hobby” and many opinion leaders stayed with established media outlets (Li, 2018).

Economic autonomy of popular self-media has turned them into de-facto independent media businesses in China, as they are different from the state-controlled news organizations and the corporate private news providers (such as Sina, Sohu, Tencent and Toutiao). Such status of self-media has a profound impact on their autonomy of expression. As my interviewee IE-12 comments:

In my opinion, WeChat is a great platform. When you have enough followers, you can get rid of the reliance on your employer. Also, through WeChat, I can exert my influence on others without relying on traditional media [my translation].

—IE-12, senior editor of a central news organization and self-media operator, 2018

For my interviewee IE-12, popular self-media enjoy not only economic autonomy, but also more autonomy of expression, in that they can influence their audience without relying on news organizations. Relating to his own working experience, my interviewee IE-10 also thinks platforms have made news publishing much easier, as self-media operators are not subject to the gatekeeping process of traditional media:

Platforms have significantly simplified the process of content publishing. When I was a journalist, my articles needed to undergo the approval of desk editor, the managing editor, the editor-in-chief, and then possibly the ‘invisible’ official at the provincial Publicity Department [my translation].

—IE-10, former journalist of *Southern Metropolis*, 2018

However, the independence or autonomy of self-media in expression should not be exaggerated. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, economic autonomy may not have boosted, but rather weakened the autonomy of

expression of many popular self-media, especially in political areas. As my interviewee IE-13 observes:

If a self-media turns into a media business, the self-media operator would not dare to express his/her opinions [in political areas]. Because your advertisers or investors would have concerns, and they certainly don't want to see your business closed for political reasons [...]. We don't want to get involved in political topics [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist of *Southern Weekend*, 2018

The above situation described by my interviewee IE-13 is easy to understand. This is because popular self-media now have much more to lose, given that having their articles deleted and/or accounts suspended or closed means economic loss for them, which may discourage them from challenging the censors (Li, 2018). In fact, as Table 6.1 shows, the main purpose of Chinese self-media accounts is to make money (51%), gain popularity (18%) or satisfy personal interests (28.5%). Such a phenomenon—the pursuit of economic benefits stifles the autonomy of expression of self-media—can be called the “power of capital” (Zhao, 2004: 179). It shows that while platforms have transformed China's news environment into a more open and autonomous news ecosystem (as discussed in chapter 5), expression autonomy of self-media in political areas may be further limited, rather than expanded, in the platform era.

The “power of capital” is not only exercised by advertisers and investors, but also by news consumers, who can, to some degree, influence the content production of self-media. This is because readers' donations or subscription fees have become important revenue source for many self-media operators (Li, 2018). Partly due to this reason, self-media operators often try to satisfy the demands of their readers or followers. As my interviewee IE-12, who receives subscription fees from his subscribers, notes:

When I work for traditional media, I write what I need to write. But for my self-media account [...], I consider more about my readers' demands. So, the traditional media create demands for their readers, but self-media meet the readers' demands [my translation].

—IE-12, senior editor of a central news organization and self-media operator, 2018

The “power of capital” over self-media is similar to the influence of media commercialization on Chinese news organizations (see section 2.2.2 for more information). On the one hand, media commercialization has increased the autonomy of news organizations in news coverage, mainly in non-political areas (e.g., Ma, 2000). On the other hand, as Zhao (2004) observes, media commercialization in China has created a media system in which political power increasingly converges with the “power of capital” (p.179).

Popular self-media as online opinion leaders

Self-media opinion leaders on Chinese platforms have posed some challenges to the party-state in relation to public opinion control. Chinese scholars often trace back the term “opinion leader” to Lazarsfeld et al. (1948)’s “two-step flow of communication” model (see section 3.1.2). In this project, “online opinion leaders” refers to popular self-media, who not only have big number of followers (usually over 100,000 followers), but also voice opinions about issues of public interests. This definition draws on the 2012 Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion, which defines “online opinion leaders” as intellectuals who care about public topics and hold humanistic values (People’s Daily Online, 2012).

The term “online opinion leaders” has been particularly linked to the so-called “Big Vs” arising from Weibo in China. Here, “V” is the symbol associated with verified Weibo accounts. Since 2012, the annual Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion has included a part to analyze the role of online opinion leaders in relation to China’s public opinion. Table 6.2 summarizes some features of China’s online opinion leaders based on data from these annual reports. For example, the report in 2012 showed that, as for

the profession of 100 popular Weibo “Big Vs”, media professionals (28%) and academics (27%) were the two biggest groups, followed by writers/freelancers (14%) and officials (13%). According to the report in 2013, the numbers of “Big V” accounts with over 100,000, one million, and 10 million followers were 19,000, 3,300 and 200 respectively. The report in 2013 classified the political values of online opinion leaders and found that over half (54%) of them were critical of the government, 18% were pro-government, and 28% held the middle ground.⁵⁰ These features give us some clues why the rise of online opinion leaders in China has caused some concerns to the party-state, given that many opinion leaders have big followers and most of them are critical of the party-state.

Table 6.2: Features of China’s online opinion leaders

	Online opinion leaders	Number/ percentage	Report year
Scale	over 100,000 followers	19,000	2013
	over 1 million followers	3,300	
	over 10 million followers	200	
Profession composition	media professionals	28%	2012
	academics	27%	
	writers/freelancers	14%	
	officials	13%	
	others	18%	
Political values	critical of government	54%	2013
	pro-government	18%	
	Middle	28%	

Source: Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion (2012; 2013).

In recent years, in addition to Weibo, WeChat has become another important, if not more important, platform for online opinion leaders, because many Weibo “Big Vs” have migrated to WeChat and also a new generation of “Big

⁵⁰As this survey was conducted in 2013 with regard to Weibo opinion leaders, the result may not be representative of today’s self-media opinion leaders, a majority of them are now mainly based on WeChat.

Vs” has emerged from WeChat. A prominent example of the role of WeChat self-media opinion leaders in influencing public opinion is the “Changsheng vaccine scandal” in 2018. Changsheng Bio-technology is a major pharmaceutical producer based in northeast China’s Jilin province. On 15 July 2018, China’s Food and Drug Administration announced that Changsheng had falsified production records of rabies vaccine and been ordered to halt production and recall relevant vaccines. News reports showed that the firm arbitrarily changed process parameters and equipment during production. Just days later, it was reported that a batch of DTP vaccines produced by the firm in 2017 was also sub-standard. According to news reports, more than 250,000 doses of the sub-standard DTP vaccines had already been sold to some Chinese centres for disease and prevention.

Initially, news reports about this incident had not attracted much attention from the public. However, a viral self-media article, titled *King of Vaccines*, changed everything. On 21 July 2018, a popular self-media operator called *Shouwang* (兽王) published the article on his WeChat official account. The long article, which was based on earlier news reports rather than first-hand investigation, did not focus on the newly discovered wrongdoings of Changsheng. Instead, it traced back a complex web of corruption spanning decades, exposing how some executives of Changsheng controlled a series of major vaccine production companies and gained striking profits through bribery and other illegal ways (Zhang and Yuan, 2018). The article was soon widely shared on WeChat, “lighting the fuse” of commentaries and analysis about the scandal (Bandurski, 2018). While the article on WeChat was deleted the next day, many self-media and major news organizations including CCTV and *People’s Daily* picked up the momentum and asked for thorough investigation on the incident. From then, public concerns and anger about vaccine safety were ignited. For example, by 24 July 2018, Weibo users had viewed hashtags related to the vaccine scandal more than 600 million times (Zhang and Yuan, 2018).

The Chinese government quickly responded to the vaccine incident. On July 22, a day after the viral article from self-media *Shouwang* was published,

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang promised to crack down on such illegal acts that endanger the safety of peoples' lives. On July 23, President Xi Jinping, who was visiting Rwanda, called the incident "terrible and shocking" and promised that the government would "investigate to the very bottom" (Hernandez, 2018). After that, China's drug regulators and the central government sent teams to conduct a series of investigations of vaccine issues, and relevant persons from Changsheng were arrested. In August, four top officials including the vice-governor of Jilin province were sacked and dozens of others were disciplined (Leng, 2018).

It is worth noting that in this case, before the self-media *Shouwang* published his article, a number of news organizations had already reported this scandal but did not spark wide public attention (Bandurski, 2018). Part of the reasons may be that news organizations only reported some dry facts, and the public needed the explanation and interpretation of opinion leaders to understand the deeper and wider impact of those facts—a typical situation described by the "two-step flow of communication" model (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). In this case, the self-media *Shouwang* played the role of a key opinion leader for the wider public to understand the significance of this incident.

This case also shows that, compared to the factual news from news organizations, opinions from self-media seem to appeal more to the emotions of news consumers and are therefore more influential in shaping public opinion. Thus, it provides empirical evidence about the so-called "post-truth" phenomenon in China's context. According to the definition of Oxford Dictionaries, the word "post-truth" relates to circumstances in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".⁵¹ In the West, the "post-truth" phenomenon has drawn much attention in recent years, especially because of the EU referendum in the UK and American presidential election in 2016 (e.g., Davies, 2016; Sismondo, 2017). In China, this phenomenon has been particularly linked to the content features and media influence of self-media,

⁵¹See the definition from Oxford Dictionaries. Available from: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> (Accessed 7 July 2019).

which often appeal to the emotions of news consumers to stimulate their sharing activities. For instance, one main reason why articles published by *Mimeng* often go viral is that the self-media had always targeted the “pain spots” of news consumers and appeal to their emotions (e.g., Haoen, 2016).

The “Changsheng vaccine scandal” is a typical case where Chinese self-media opinion leaders have played a key role in setting the public agenda and forcing the Chinese government to respond to online public opinion. As Ding Daoshi, an online commentator, observes (Ding, 2018a):

In recent years, during some major incidents [including this vaccine scandal], while news organizations have been lagging behind for various reasons, self-media have played the pioneering role in sparking public attention [...] and forcing the government to improve administrative efficiency. Therefore, self-media have become an important force that advances the development of China’s society [my translation].

It is important to note that while self-media opinion leaders have demonstrated their capacity in influencing public opinion, such influence is mainly limited to social, rather than political, area. As my interviewee IE-16 observes:

In those most-controlled areas like politics and major international news such as the Sino-US trade war, news organizations still have more influence, although self-media now have considerable influence in major social incidents [my translation].

—IE-16, senior executive of a Chinese media association and former media executive, 2018

Again, this situation can be linked to the impact of media commercialization on Chinese news organizations. Wu (2000), among others, notes that marketized Chinese news organizations have larger space in the social realm than in the political; given that there is “no impenetrable fence” standing

between the social and political realms, a “spillover” effect could be at work (p. 62). However, the possible “spillover” effect has so far not been witnessed in China and political control over Chinese news organizations has been strengthened in Xi Jinping era (see next section), and Wu’s optimistic outlook has been criticized as “premature” (Hassid, 2008: 217).

The above situation concerning marketized news organizations may also be true with self-media. While there is indeed no impenetrable fence between political and social areas in China, it seems unlikely that a “spillover” effect will be witnessed in terms of the influence of self-media opinion leaders. This is not only because only news organizations are permitted to produce news in political areas in China, but also because the above-discussed “power of capital” is discouraging most popular self-media from covering political topics. Therefore, the overall influence of today’s self-media opinion leaders in political area is in decline when compared to the earlier Weibo “Big Vs”, many of whom voiced opinions about political issues (People’s Daily Online, 2018c).

6.2 Media power structure and public opinion guidance

This section argues that the above-discussed media power shift, together with the increasingly powerful platforms, has led to a changing media power structure in China. This new structure makes it necessary for the party-state to adjust its old model of public opinion guidance, which mainly relied on state-controlled news organizations. This section will present and discuss my own model of China’s platform-era media power structure, and then examine how the party-state has been adjusting its strategies for public opinion guidance accordingly.

6.2.1 Media power structure in the platform era

Pre-platform media power structure

Figure 6.3 describes the media power structure in China’s pre-platform news environment. In this structure, the party-state, as the owner/controller of China’s news media and information infrastructure (such as the backbone networks) and the regulator of the media and Internet industries (see section

2.2), sat at the top and dominated the hierarchical structure. On the one hand, the party-state mainly relied on state-controlled news organizations to guide public opinion, and one common way of doing so was to send news organizations regular directives that instructed their media practices. On the other hand, the party-state exerted strict control over both news organizations and online news providers through media and Internet regulations and through eliciting self-censorship within them (see section 2.2).

In this media power structure, news organizations sat at the centre (though not the most powerful actor) and largely dominated news production (as discussed in section 5.3). They distributed content to news audiences directly and provided news content to private online news portals like Sina through content copyright agreements (SCIO and MIIT, 2005). News organizations were mainly funded by advertising revenues.

Figure 6.3: China's pre-platform media power structure

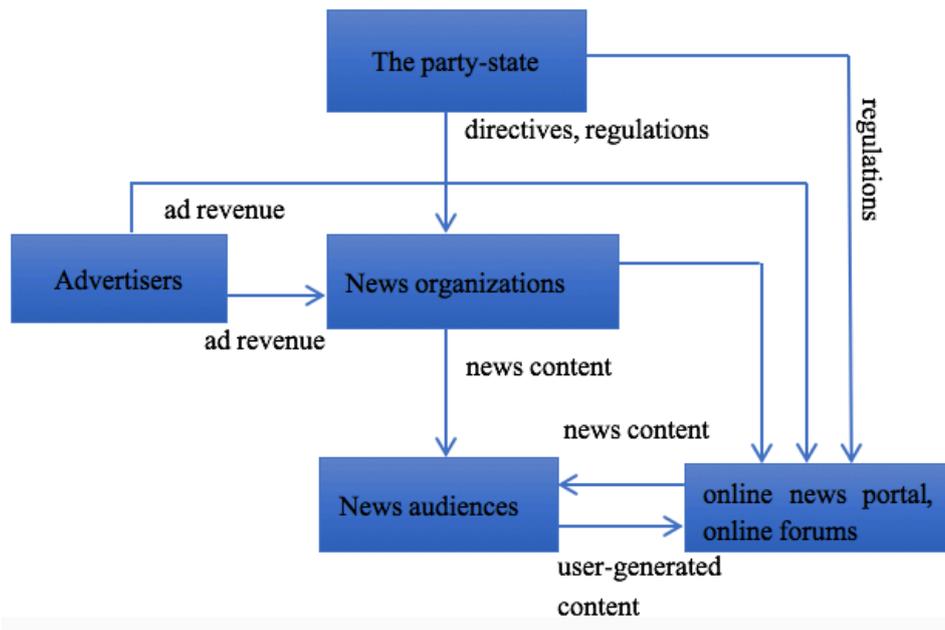
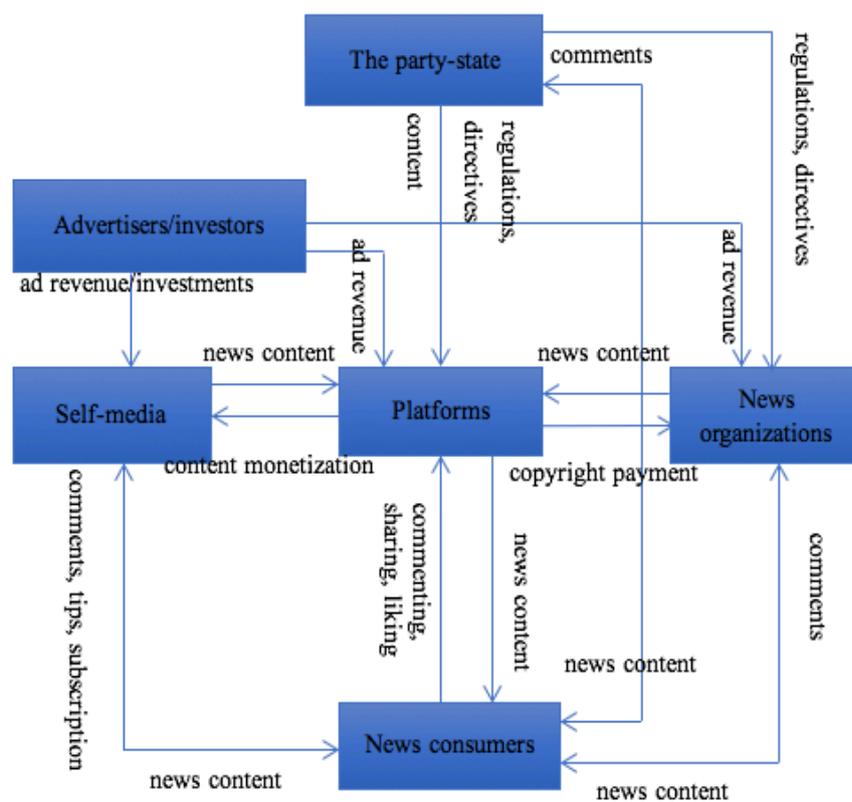


Figure 6.4: China's media power structure in a platform era



While their pursuit of advertising income may have led to “bottom-line thinking and sensationalism” (Gang and Bandurski, 2011: 44), it has not weakened the party-state’s political control over news organizations (e.g., Zhao, 2012).

In this structure, news audiences accessed news and information from both news organizations and the Internet, and they turned into “producers”⁵² (Burns, 2006) by producing user-generated content and participating actively in online discussions. According to the annual Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion, even before the rise of platforms, the Internet (online news portals, online forums, BBS, blogs, and etc.) was already the most important news gateway for Chinese Internet users and the most important originating sites for major events or incidents in China (People’s Daily Online, 2008). However, in the pre-platform era, the involvement of professional news organizations was still the crucial step in the evolving of breaking incidents and the intervention of the government (People’s Daily Online, 2010). This is not necessarily the case in the platform era, as shown in the above-discussed case of “Changsheng vaccine scandal”.

Platform-era media power structure

As illustrated in Figure 6.3 and Figure 6.4, platforms have brought many changes to China’s media power structure, which mainly include:

- Platforms, rather than news organizations, are now sitting at the centre of the media power structure, mediating and influencing all other actors (see chapter 5 and section 6.1);
- Apart from being the media owner/controller and media and Internet regulator, the party-state now has another identity: a type of news producer (in the form of state accounts on platforms, see section 5.1.2);
- News organizations are no longer the dominant news producers, and their media influence has been in relative decline with serious journalism (especially investigative reporting) weakened, a further-

⁵²Here, “producers” means a hybrid of producers and users.

disrupted business model and the exodus of media professionals (see section 6.1.1);

- Self-media rise as an important type of news producers, and some popular self-media are playing the role of online opinion leaders, setting public agenda and framing the issues during major social incidents (see section 6.1.2);
- “News audiences” have become “news consumers”, with more autonomy in curating their own news feeds (see section 5.3) and the capability in influencing news production through direct payments to news producers (see section 6.1.2);
- Although advertisements are still the main revenue source for news providers in the platform era, direct payments from news consumers are on the rise. Some news organizations like *Caixin.com* have started their subscription-based model, and many self-media operators are receiving donations and subscription fees from news consumers (see section 6.1.1).

The above changes regarding China’s media power structure demonstrate that platforms are an important game-changer or winner-picker in China’s platform-era news ecosystem. While having relatively disempowered news organizations, they have empowered self-media as important news actors. However, it is important to note that platforms have not changed the fundamental nature of China’s media power structure: the dominance of the party-state. In other words, China’s media power structure is still a hierarchical one, dominated by the party-state as the owner/controller of news media and information infrastructure and the regulator of the media and Internet industries.

Regarding the platform-era media structure, two features are worth further discussing in terms of their implications for China’s public opinion control. First, the central position of platforms entails them to become the central control points on the Internet and thus the ideal actor to disseminate information to a wide audience. In fact, as major private platforms have increasingly become the converging sites for news content and news

consumption, they are the only actor that has the capability of distributing certain content directly to a massive number of news consumers. In other words, compared to state-controlled news organizations, private platforms may be situated in a better position to guide public opinion regarding news distribution, although they are generally not major news producers yet.

The role of platforms in shaping public opinion has been exemplified in their capacity in influencing the agenda of both the public and the media. Such capacity of platforms is mainly embodied in the following activities: (1) the intervention in news distribution; and (2) the curating of various rankings (such as top searches, top topics and top stories, which are similar to trending topics and stories on some Western platforms). As discussed in section 5.2.2, Chinese platforms often adopt “strong human intervention” (as in the words of Wu Chenguang, former editor-in-chief of Yidian) in news distribution during significant events like the CCP’s 19th National Congress. In this way, platforms can be an important tool for the party-state to guide public opinion during major events and incidents. Besides, various rankings compiled by Chinese platforms, especially Weibo, have become an important setter for both the public agenda and media agenda (e.g., Jiang, 2014; Yang, 2017; Yan and Zhao, 2015). Jiang (2014) studied whether Weibo rankings could impact on the agenda of Chinese mainstream media and found out that some Weibo top stories did influence the agenda of China Central Television (CCTV).

The second feature worth further discussion is the power shift caused by platforms, namely, the relative decline of news organizations and the rise of self-media in China’s media power structure. Such power shift means that the old model of public opinion guidance of the Chinese party-state, which mainly relied on state-controlled news organizations, is no longer viable or effective in the platform era. Regarding this power shift, the role of self-media opinion leaders in influencing public opinion is of particular concern to the party-state. As discussed in section 6.1.1, many popular self-media operators are discouraged to cover political topics due to the “power of capital”. However, it would be reasonable to state that there must be some popular self-media operators whose main purposes may not be profit-making but rather

gaining popularity and influence (see Table 6.1 about the motivations of self-media) or aiming to elicit changes to China's political system. According to the 2013 Analysis Report of China's Online Public Opinion, in the year 2013, over half (54%) Weibo "Big Vs" were critical of the government in terms of their political values (see Table 6.2), which provides an explanation for the existence of politically sensitive content on China's platforms.

6.2.2 The state's strategies of public opinion guidance

In response to the above-discussed changing media power structure, the Chinese party-state has adjusted its strategies for public opinion guidance correspondingly. So far, the measures adopted by the party-state mainly include: (1) strengthening the capacity of news organizations in public opinion guidance; (2) incorporating private platforms into its system of public opinion guidance; and (3) utilizing other resources (e.g., self-media opinion leaders and patriotic Internet users) for public opinion guidance.

Strengthening news organizations

While the media power of Chinese news organizations has witnessed a relative decline in the platform era, they still enjoy some privileges or protection from the party-state. As my interviewee IE-05, senior executive of a major platform, commented in 2017, "Chinese news organizations are not only news organizations [my translation]." Here, what my interviewee IE-05 tried to say is that, in China, news organizations are also official institutions, not only ordinary media companies. The most important privilege enjoyed by Chinese news organizations is that they have the exclusive rights of news gathering and production in key areas, namely, public affairs (such as political, economic, military and foreign affairs) and breaking social incidents (CAC, 2017a). Such an arrangement has given news organizations a crucial advantage in dominating news gathering and production in these areas, especially during significant news events and major incidents. As my interviewee IE-09 comments:

Platforms and commercial news websites are only the second-hand transmitters, and it is we who get the first-hand news and information.

CCTV News is China's *BBC News* and *Sky News*...Just take the annual "two sessions"⁵³ as an example: which platform can really influence the "two sessions" [my translation]?

—IE-09, senior journalist of *China Central Television*, 2018

Just as my interviewee IE-09 observes, during major events (e.g., China's annual "two sessions") and breaking incidents, news organizations are still a crucial type (though not necessarily the only⁵⁴) of news source. That is why Chinese private platforms still rely on news organizations in providing news content in key areas. However, it is necessary to point out that, in reality, the boundaries of these key areas can be vague. Many self-media operators have been active in producing commentaries on major social incidents, as evidenced in the above-discussed "Changsheng vaccine" case, which eventually became a major incident with political repercussions.

To enhance the media influence of news organizations in the platform era, the party-state has driven them to embrace private platforms in their news production and distribution (as evidenced in the WWOA strategy, see section 5.1.1) and to deepen their integration with new media. In August 2014, President Xi Jinping called for measures to build several new types of media groups that are "strong, credible, and influential" (Ng, 2014). An attempt to establish such new media groups is the restructuring of *China Media Group* (CMG) in March 2018, the merger of three former national broadcasters into a single new broadcaster (see section 2.2.3). According to Xinhua, the goal of this merger is to "strengthen and improve public opinion guidance" (Kuo, 2018). Another way to strengthen the influence of news organizations is to encourage (or force) private platforms to prioritize the content from news organizations. An example is that Toutiao, frequently punished by China's Internet and media regulators for hosting vulgar content and incorrect public

⁵³"Two sessions" refers to the meetings of China's top legislature the National People's Congress (NPC) and the top political advisory body the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). See: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/01/c_137009166.htm (Accessed 7 July 2019).

⁵⁴Other than news organizations, state accounts or witnesses of breaking incidents can also be important news sources during major events or breaking incidents, though only news organizations are entitled to gather news (i.e., conduct interviews or investigations) under these circumstances.

opinion orientation, has promised to enhance the cooperation with “authoritative media” (referring to news organizations, especially central media giants) and to prioritize the distribution of their content (Bytedance, 2018).

In recent years, to counterbalance the influence of private platforms, an increasing number of news organizations or state-controlled media conglomerates have launched their own open publishing platforms or launched such platforms jointly with private Internet companies. Such a development has been called “media platformization” in China, meaning news organizations not only use third-party platforms to spread their content, but also build their own open-publishing platforms to attract more news producers and consumers (Zhang and Li, 2019). The most prominent example in this area is the peoplehao platform, launched by *People’s Daily* in June 2018. At the time of launching, peoplehao platform hosted over 2000 accounts from news organizations, state departments and self-media. According to Lu Xinning, the former vice editor-in-chief of *People’s Daily*, one key feature of peoplehao platform is its “party algorithm” (Lu, 2018):

We attach great importance to algorithmic recommendation, and we are studying how to use “party algorithm” to enhance the efficiency of matching massive content with personal demand. We strongly oppose uncontrollable, chaotic and dangerous algorithms, and believe that any algorithms should [...] be governed by mainstream values [my translation].

From the above quotation, we can see that although *People’s Daily* has been very critical of the algorithms of private platforms like Toutiao, it does not oppose algorithmic distribution itself. Although it is not known what specific factors are included in its so-called “party-algorithm”, it can be inferred that the “mainstream values” adopted by the *People’s Daily*, the central mouthpiece of the CCP, are the same values endorsed by the party-state. However, so far, state-controlled platforms like peoplehao platform cannot rival major private platforms in terms of scale and popularity.

While trying to strengthen the media power of news organizations, the party-state has also tightened its control over them. In recent years, the party-state has publicly required news organizations to show absolute loyalty to the Party. For example, in 2015, when inspecting the *People's Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报), President Xi Jinping emphasized that “News and propaganda work must always be led by people who are loyal and reliable to the Party [my translation]” (Xinhuanet, 2015). On another occasion, during the Symposium of News and Public Opinion Work in 2016, President Xi went further to emphasize that “All party media must be surnamed the Party”, meaning they must be absolutely loyal to the CCP (Zeng, 2016). The party-state's strict control over news organizations has been exemplified in the case of *Southern Weekend*, once among China's most outspoken news outlets. As Gang and Bandurski (2001) observe, the newspaper was able to “weather several political storms” with the central authority because it had support from provincial leaders in Guangdong province, where the newspaper is based (p.41). However, China's central authority successfully strengthened its control over the newspaper by nurturing loyal agents at the local level (Guan, Xia and Cheng, 2017). The strengthened control over the newspaper was epitomized in the “2013 *Southern Weekend* Incident”. The incident was about the conflict between the newspaper and the PD of Guangdong over a New Year's special editorial from the newspaper. The editorial was changed significantly under the pressure from the PD officials and the changed version was found to have several factual mistakes. The newsroom staff then went on strike to protest against the censorship. After this incident, many journalists of *Southern Weekend* left the newspaper, a phenomenon discussed in section 6.1.1.

It seems that the efforts of the party-state in strengthening the media power of news organizations have been offset, to some degree, by the state's tightened control over news organizations. As the quotation from my interviewee IE-06 (see section 5.1.2) shows, news organizations sometimes do not voice their opinions during major incidents, because they are not allowed, or self-censorship has discouraged them, to do so, which has made

the voices of self-media more prominent during major incidents. This is hardly an expected outcome for the party-state, nor an ideal situation for the party-state's public opinion control.

Incorporating private platforms

Given the central position of platforms in China's media power structure (as discussed in section 7.2.1), it is crucial for the party-state to incorporate them within its public opinion guidance system. This is why Chinese government regulators have required major private platforms to attend regular internal meetings or briefings, which, historically, were only open to official news organizations. Currently, major platforms are literally sitting together with news organizations during such internal meetings organized by the Internet content regulator and its local offices. As my interviewee IE-11 comments:

[In terms of public opinion guidance,] I don't think ownership is a major issue. Major private websites and platforms also attend the briefings organized by the CAC and receive internal directives. The bottom line for both [referring to official and private online news providers] is the same. The party will not allow the existence of two different voices [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

The above quotation shows that, in the eyes of my interviewee IE-11, private platforms are not that different from state-controlled news organizations in terms of public opinion guidance. In other words, the party-state has successfully incorporated private platforms into its public opinion guidance system.

Moreover, the party-state has incorporated platform employees with editorial responsibilities into its compulsory training system related to public opinion guidance. According to the *Administrative Measures for Content Management Employees of Internet News Information Services Providers* (CAC, 2017g), such trainings include two parts: one part is organized by the Internet regulators (i.e., CAC and its provincial offices), and the other is

provided by online news providers themselves. Here, online news providers include official news websites and private platforms or websites. Overall, the training mainly involves professional codes for online news provision (such as refusing paid-journalism) and the party-state's important policies and laws/regulations relevant to Internet security, news and public opinion (article 12). It is obvious that the purpose of this training scheme is to familiarize employees of all online news providers with their responsibilities in public opinion guidance.

Editors-in-chief and other senior executives of private platforms are also invited to attend some special internal training sessions. A prominent example is a ten-day training session organized by China's United Front Work Department (UFWD, 中央统战部) in 2015, which was attended by many senior executives of China's major private platforms, including Zhang Yiming (founder of Toutiao) and Chen Tong (president of Yidian and former editor-in-chief of Sina). UFWD is a department under the direct command of the CCP's Central Committee, whose main function is "to manage relations with the non-Communist Party elites [...], in so doing [...] to ensure that these groups are supportive of and useful to Communist Party rule" (Zhan, 1995: 66-67). The fact that executives like Zhang Yiming are included in the session is itself a signal that the party-state wants to incorporate private platforms into its public opinion guidance system. The response of private platforms to the party-state's incorporating efforts will be discussed in section 8.1.1 within the framework of state-platform collaboration governance.

Utilizing other resources

In addition to embracing platforms, the party-state has also tried to woo and utilize self-media opinion leaders in shaping online public opinion. The party-state's efforts include inviting self-media opinion leaders who hold pro-government or middle political values (see Table 6.2) to attend high-profile forums or internal trainings organized by state departments. A prominent example is that two young online opinion leaders Zhou Xiaoping and Hua Qianfang were invited to attend a high-profile symposium on arts and literature in October 2014, which was attended by President Xi Jinping

himself. During the symposium, Xi specifically lauded Zhou and Hua and encouraged them to continue to produce “works that carry positive energy” (Hui and Wertime, 2014). Both Zhou and Hua are known as nationalistic Internet writers. One of Zhou’s most famous articles, titled “*Please Do Not Fail this Era*”, described his personal change from a young Chinese who deeply admired the West to one who believes in China’s government. It is easy to see why the party-state has endorsed online opinion leaders like Zhou.

The party-state’s efforts in winning over self-media opinion leaders have been frequently seen in recent years. Since 2014, the Internet regulator CAC and its local offices have regularly invited online celebrities (mostly online opinion leaders) to visit various Chinese provinces. For example, online celebrities were invited to revisit the “Silk Road” (the ancient trade routes connecting China and the West) in 2014. The purpose of such activities is for the government and online opinion leaders to “build closer relations, dispel disagreements, and spread positive energy together” [my translation] (People’s Daily Online, 2014b).

Moreover, the afore-mentioned UFWD also regularly organizes training sessions that involve CEOs of private platforms and popular self-media. For example, in March 2018, UFWD invited some top self-media operators like Ma Ling (the operator of *Mimeng*) to attend a one-week symposium. During the symposium, Ma was quoted as saying that she would cover more topics that would spread “positive energy” (Ifeng, 2018b). The words of Ma show that popular self-media are pressured to make pro-government expressions publicly. Ironically, in less than a year, the account *Mimeng* was permanently closed across platforms for publishing a fake story, which will be further discussed in chapter 8.

Another useful resource for the party-state’s public opinion guidance is the so-called “little pink” group (meaning young patriotic Internet users). The term “little pink” originates from Jinjiang Literature City, a literature website that uses pink as its main colour and has a high proportion of female users. In 2008, young Internet users of the website were labeled as “little pink” because

of their strong patriotic expression. The term now refers to young patriotic Internet users in a general sense. Different from the “Fifty Cent Party” (see section 2.2.4 for more discussion) who are paid by the party-state to spread pro-government messages online, the rising “little pink” group acts largely voluntarily and in a collective way (People’s Daily Online, 2017). The group often gathers around the official accounts of the Communist Youth League (CYL), defending China’s sovereignty and territory integrity (Ibid.). That is to say, the key feature of the “little pink” group is their “patriotic” tendency, and thus they can be utilized by the party-state where patriotism or nationalism can be incited to shape public opinion in the interests of the CCP. It is worth mentioning that, President Xi Jinping stressed in a speech that “patriotism” is the “most fundamental” value among the twelve “socialist core values”⁵⁵ advocated by the party-state (Xinhuanet, 2016a).

The role of the “little pink” has been witnessed in a number of major incidents in recent years. A typical example is the so-called “Facebook Expedition” (帝吧出征) incident. In January 2016, days after Tsai Ing-wen, the Taiwan pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party candidate, was elected Taiwan “president”, her Facebook page was bombarded with tens of thousands of pro-China-mainland comments within a number of hours. This was an unprecedented effort self-organized by Chinese young Internet users, who collectively jumped the “Great Firewall” (the Chinese censorship system blocking access to selected foreign websites) and launched a coordinated anti-Taiwan-independence messaging campaign (ABC News, 2016).

It is worth noting that while the “little pink” can be a valuable resource for the party-state to shape public opinion, they may also pose some challenges to the party-state. This is because the “little pink” group is generally impulsive, anti-West, and intolerant of freedom of thought (People’s Daily Online, 2017), and thus not always an ideal resource for the party-state.

⁵⁵According to the CCP’s 18th National Congress Report in 2012, the so-called “socialist core values” include three levels of values: at the national level, the values are “prosperity”, “democracy”, “civility” and “harmony”; at the social level, the values are “freedom”, “equality”, “justice” and the “rule of law”; and at the individual level, the values are “patriotism”, “dedication”, “integrity” and “friendship”.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has examined the impact of platforms on China's media power structure and the party-state's corresponding strategies for public opinion guidance. A number of obvious media power changes have been examined in China's platform-centered news ecosystem. First, news organizations are relatively disempowered by platforms, although they still enjoy privileges in news gathering and production and some protection from the party-state. Second, self-media have risen as important news actors, whose media power is demonstrated particularly in the capacity of self-media opinion leaders in shaping public opinion during major social incidents. Third, platforms have become a crucial actor in China's media power structure, in that they are not only sitting at the center of the structure and becoming the main "battlefield" for online public opinion in China, but also have the capacity of influencing the media power of other actors and influencing the public agenda directly. However, these changes have not undermined the dominance of the party-state in China's media power structure, which is still a hierarchical one.

Faced with the changing media power structure, the party-state has adjusted its strategies for public opinion guidance. It has tried to strengthen the position of news organizations in China's media power structure, and at the same time to incorporate private platforms within its system of public opinion guidance and to utilize other possible resources including self-media opinion leaders. The outcome of these strategies will be further discussed in chapter 8. The party-state's response to a changing media power structure has demonstrated its adaptiveness in the platform era. Such adaptiveness has also been exemplified in the party-state's adjustment of China's Internet regulatory framework, which will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Governance *of* and *through* platforms in China

Unlike their overseas peers, Chinese platforms are still too weak [compared to the government] [...]. In China, the government is the most powerful [my translation].

—IE-09, senior journalist of *China Central Television* (CCTV), 2018

Introduction

As early chapters (chapters 5 and 6) have shown, digital media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao have transformed China's news environment and brought about obvious changes to China's media power structure, which in turn has profound implications for the party-state's public opinion control. However, there is another side of this "powerful platforms" story. As my interviewee IE-09, a senior journalist of *China Central Television*, observes, platforms are still a relatively "weak" actor when compared to the Chinese party-state, which is not only the owner or controller of China's news organizations and information infrastructure, but also the media and Internet regulator. This chapter focuses on how the party-state exercises control over platforms and adjusts its Internet regulatory framework and approach in the platform era.

In discussing platform regulation or platform governance,⁵⁶ as shown in section 3.2, it is necessary to differentiate between governance *of* and governance *by* platforms (Gillespie, 2017a). In China's context, governance *of* platforms is exercised by government regulators through evolving regulations, while governance *by* platforms is exercised by private platforms to meet the requirements of the party-state and/or to serve their own commercial interests. This thesis mainly focuses on the first purpose of governance *by* platforms: to meet the requirements of the state. In this case,

⁵⁶As defined in section 1.3.2, in this thesis, "regulation" is associated with the activities of the government, while "governance" is a wider concept, accommodating all relevant activities of various entities including the government and private companies.

governance *by* platforms can also be understood as state governance *through* platforms.

This chapter breaks into two sections. Section one examines the Chinese party-state's governance *of* platforms, including the adjustment of the Internet governance framework in order to target platforms, the content liability of platforms, and limitations on private ownership regarding news-related services. Section two investigates governance *by* platforms, or state governance *through* platforms, as platforms are required to take the “main responsibilities” (主体责任) in governing their sites (CAC, 2016). It mainly discusses the features, existing problems, and a crucial instrument (i.e., platform surveillance) of this new governance approach.

7.1 Governance *of* Chinese platforms

As discussed in section 3.3, in relation to the role and power of platforms in the news sphere, there are debates around whether and how to regulate platforms in the West. In contrast, Chinese platforms (and the earlier generation of online news portals like Sina and Sohu) have been defined as Internet News Information Service (INIS) providers (CAC, 2017a; SCIO and MIIT, 2005) and regulated as such. In other words, Chinese platforms are not merely regulated as media companies, but also as online news providers. As discussed in section 2.2, China has maintained a stricter regulatory framework on news content, given that it is considered more closely related to public opinion. In recent years, as Chinese platforms have brought challenges and concerns to the party-state's public opinion control, China's Internet regulator has been adjusting its regulatory framework to target platforms and constantly upgrading its regulations concerning platforms. This section focuses on the following aspects of China's Internet regulation in relation to platforms: (1) regulatory framework; (2) content regulation; and (3) private capital.

7.1.1 The adjustment of the regulatory framework

This sub-section argues that, faced with a transformed news ecosystem in the platform era and the challenges arising with it, the party-state has been

adjusting its Internet regulatory framework accordingly. As Yang (2011) argues, China's Internet governance has undergone three stages since its formation in 1994. During the first stage (1994-1999), the main focus was establishing administrative and legal frameworks to address online security issues and Internet service provisions. During the second stage (2000-2002), China's Internet governance mainly focused on implementing content regulations that targeted both Internet content providers and individual users. From the year 2003, China's Internet governance entered the third stage, in which Internet control was transformed from pure "government" regulation to "governance", meaning a wide range of official and non-official institutions, rules, and practices were combined to govern the Internet. In recent years (roughly since 2014), the Internet content regulator CAC has publicly required Internet companies and platforms to take the "main responsibility" in governing online content (e.g., CAC, 2015; CAC, 2016a; People's Daily Online, 2017; Gov.cn, 2016). This means that China's Internet governance has entered a new stage: mainly targeting platforms. As the annual Analysis Report on China's Online Public Opinion observes, the party-state has adjusted China's Internet governance from mainly relying on keyword filtering and targeting some individuals and sensitive topics to mainly targeting platforms and holding them liable for the content they host (People's Daily Online, 2015; 2017).

The adjustment of China's Internet regulatory framework is a natural choice for the Chinese party-state. As Gillespie (2007a) rightly observes, targeting individuals is "difficult, consumes time and resources, and makes little impact", while "getting a platform to intervene systematically promises to have a much broader impact" (p.23).

In recent years, especially since the establishment of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CCAC) and the restructuring of the Internet content regulator CAC in 2014 (see section 2.2.3), almost all new Internet regulations concern or focus on platforms, demonstrating that the regulation of platforms has become the focus of China's Internet regulation.

A new platform service licence

One development in relation to this regulatory adjustment is the introduction of a new type of INIS licence—communication platform service (传播平台服务)—in the amended *Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services* (PAINIS) (CAC, 2017a, article 5). Previously, the earlier version of PAINIS promulgated in 2005 identified two types of INIS licences: “information gathering and publishing services” and “information re-publishing services”, which were assigned to websites run by news organizations and private Internet companies respectively. As discussed in section 2.2.3, private Internet companies are not allowed to gather and produce their own news content in some key areas, but only allowed to *re-publish* the content from news organizations.

The introduction of a new type of INIS licence demonstrates that platforms have become an important type of online news providers that does not fit in the old regulatory framework. This is not only because platforms have become a prominent type of online news providers, but also because they are different from the earlier generation of private online news portals like Sina, Sohu and Netease in many ways. First, Chinese online news portals usually produced their own content in areas other than politics and current affairs (they did produce special feature pages in these areas through aggregating news content from various news organizations). In contrast, today’s major platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao generally do not produce their own news content, but rather provide open publishing space for a variety of sources including self-media, which has led to the diversification of news sources and the enormous expansion of news content. The second main difference between them lies in their different mechanisms regarding content curation and distribution: online news portals relied on human editors to choose and curate news content; platforms mainly rely on algorithms to sort out and distribute content, which has caused widespread concerns over content quality on platforms. The third main difference is that online news portals generally provided the same content for all users, while platforms provide personalized content for their users and much of the content is consumed in a more private space (such as WeChat group chats), making

content censorship much more difficult. Therefore, the CAC needs to update its regulations to keep up with China's changing news sphere.

According to the amended PAINIS (2017), to apply for an INIS licence (including the “communication platform service” type of licence), an entity has to demonstrate that it has editorial, technological, and financial capabilities that match its service (article 6). For example, in terms of editorial capabilities, an entity must have an editor-in-chief, who has overall responsibilities for its content and have corresponding working experience (article 11). Moreover, the entity must have full-time professional news editors⁵⁷ and content moderators, and its employees with editorial responsibilities must have corresponding qualifications (articles 6 and 11). These requirements mean that, to apply for a platform service licence, private Internet companies need to provide evidence about their capabilities not only in economic and technological areas, but also in editorial sphere (e.g., content editing and moderation).

However, the regulation does not clarify the specific conditions (such as the minimum number of professional editors, content moderators, and technical support engineers, or the minimum funding) for applying an INIS licence, leaving much vague space for the regulator to decide whether to grant an INIS service. As Perry Link (2002) argues, “vagueness” is a “purposeful” strategy of the CCP and has been a “fundamental tool” in inviting self-censorship, as it will pressure people to control their behaviour to a greater extent (cited in Hassid, 2008:421). This partly explains why private platforms are often keen to hire former professional journalists and editors,⁵⁸ as hiring more professional media professionals may make them appear more professional in content curation and moderation, which, in turn, has facilitated the exodus

⁵⁷According to the Enforcement Regulation of PAINIS (2017), “professional news editors” refers to those who have working experience in news organizations and/or relevant training certificates (article 6.2).

⁵⁸This is evidenced that many executives of major private platforms are former media professionals and the recruiting advertisements from platforms often emphasize that those with working experience in traditional media or news websites are prioritized. For example, see a recruiting advertisement from Toutiao in 2019: <https://www.liepin.com/job/1914833253.shtml>.

of media professionals and the decline of news organizations (see section 6.1.1).

It is worth noting that there exists some grey area regarding the licence of online news provision in China. At the time of writing, except for Yidian Zixun (a mobile news aggregating platform), all other major private platforms have not obtained the “communication platform service” licences yet (the case of Yidian will be discussed in section 7.1.3). Among them, the parent companies of WeChat and Weibo (namely, Tencent and Sina respectively) hold only an INIS re-publishing service licence; Toutiao does not hold any INIS licence. Such a situation has cast some shadow over the future of these platform services. For example, as a Chinese magazine article observes, the introduction of a new type of INIS licence (i.e., communication platform service) may put some popular platforms into trouble in the future; Toutiao’s future IPO⁵⁹ may, to some extent, depend on whether it can obtain a much needed INIS licence (Gao, 2017). My interviewee IE-16 also observes:

Many private platforms are operating without a relevant licence. This is because China’s Internet regulation has been lagging behind [...]. In the future, this situation is unlikely to continue [my translation].

—IE-16, a senior executive of a Chinese media association, 2018

According to my interviewee IE-16, the current situation—many platforms operating without a relevant licence—is due to the faulty regulatory system. However, such a grey area or vagueness in platform regulation may be caused partly by the party-state’s “inclusive and tolerant” attitude towards new technologies and innovations (see section 8.1.2 for more discussion). In any case, operating without a relevant licence has brought some uncertainty and insecurity to those major platforms, which may encourage more cooperation and collaboration from private platforms with the party-state.

Evolving regulations concerning platforms

⁵⁹Batedance, Toutiao’s parent company, is not a publicly listed company yet.

In recent years, the CAC, China's Internet content regulator, has been constantly expanding and updating its regulations concerning platforms. In addition to the above mentioned PAINIS (CAC, 2017a), a series of regulations concerning platforms have been introduced in recent years. Among them, some regulations are targeting platforms in general, such as regulations concerning official accounts on platforms (CAC, 2017b), online user comments (CAC, 2017c), Internet groups on platforms (CAC, 2017d), and security evaluation on new technologies and applications (CAC, 2017e). Others are targeting specific types of platforms, such as regulations on instant messaging services like WeChat (CAC, 2014), mobile apps (CAC, 2016b), Internet live streaming services (CAC, 2016c), online forums (CAC, 2017f) and microblogging services (CAC, 2018). So many regulations concerning platforms passed in so short a period demonstrate not only the adjustment of China's Internet regulatory framework from targeting individuals and individual websites to targeting platforms, but also the concerns of the party-state over the influence of platforms in relation to public opinion control.

Some articles in the above-listed regulations are exemplary in disclosing the party-state's concerns over the role of platforms in news and public opinion area. For example, the above-mentioned regulation concerning the security evaluation stipulates that INIS providers should conduct security evaluation by themselves on new technologies and new applications which "*have the nature of news and public opinion or the capability of social mobilization* [my translation]" (CAC, 2017e, article 7, emphasis added). After that, they should report the evaluation results to the CAC or its local offices for further evaluation (CAC, 2017e, article 9). That is to say, for new technologies and new applications adopted by INIS providers⁶⁰, the party-state's real concerns mainly lie in their potential or capability in influencing public opinion or facilitating social mobilization. Moreover, it is worth noting that the regulation requires the INIS providers to conduct the security evaluation by themselves first, and thus, the regulator has actually outsourced part of the evaluation tasks to INIS providers and forced them to conduct self-censorship.

⁶⁰Here, INIS providers mainly refer to private platforms, as they are the ones that have the capability of adopting innovation technologies or applications. In comparison, online news websites are run by news organizations, which generally do not have such capabilities.

To maintain its public opinion control in a platform-centered news environment, the CAC has imposed a number of common requirements on platforms in the evolving regulations. These requirements mainly include: (1) correct public opinion guidance; (2) real-name registration and user identity verification; (3) real-time content patrolling and moderation; (4) establishing a “grading and classification” management system (分级分类管理制度). These requirements are stated consistently in many of the above-mentioned regulations concerning platforms, constituting the framework for Chinese platforms to enforce content governance (this will be further discussed in next section).

Firstly, all INIS providers are required to stick to correct “public opinion guidance” and cultivate a “positive and healthy” online culture (e.g., CAC, 2017b, article 4; CAC, 2017d, article 4). That is to say, not only news organizations, but also private platforms have the responsibility to guide public opinion in China. This requirement aligns with the words of President Xi Jinping during the CCP’s News and Public Opinion Work Symposium in 2016, in which Xi emphasized: “Correct public opinion guidance must be upheld in all areas and all segments of news and public opinion work” (Xinhua, 2016). As a newspaper commentary notes, people used to associate public opinion guidance with party media only, but President Xi has made it clear that all relevant actors, including platforms and self-media, must stick to correct public opinion guidance (Hunan Daily, 2016).

Secondly, real-name registration and user identity verification are a basic requirement for Chinese platforms (e.g., CAC, 2017a, article 13; 2017b, article 6; 2017c, article 5.1). Platform users are required to follow the “backstage real name, front stage voluntary” (后台实名, 前台自愿) principle⁶¹ before they can post any content or comments. At the same time, platforms are required to verify users’ identities based on unique institutional codes (for institutional users) and government-issued identity cards and/or mobile phone

⁶¹This principle means that platform users can still use nicknames, if they prefer, on platforms, but they must disclose their real identities when registering for platform services.

numbers (for individuals)⁶². It is obvious that such real-name registration and verification requirements make it easy for platforms to identify any person or institution that has posted illegal or offending content on platforms.

Thirdly, Chinese platforms are explicitly required to carry out real-time patrolling of their sites and content moderation, and to deal with illegal content in a timely manner (e.g., CAC, 2017a, article 12). This requirement means that platforms are expected to adopt the “24/7 model” (24 hours per day and 7 days per week) in policing and monitoring their sites and to play a proactive role in governing their sites, rather than just responding to reports and complaints filed by users. For example, the regulation concerning user comments stipulates that platforms must “moderate user comments before they get posted” (CAC, 2017c, article 5.3). It is necessary to note that real-time content moderation may be conducted by machines, not necessarily by human moderators (see next section about the mechanisms of platform governance).

Lastly, Chinese platforms are required to establish the “grading and classification” management system (e.g., CAC, 2017c, article 9). Here, “grading” means that platforms should evaluate the credit grades of users and provide services to them accordingly. In other words, if a user (end-user or news producer) is found to have posted illegal or offending content on a platform, then his or her credit grade should be downgraded by the platform and thus the services they can use on platforms will be limited accordingly. For users who have seriously breached relevant laws or regulations, platforms should add them to a “blacklist”, enforce corresponding punishment (e.g., closing their accounts, banning them from re-registration) and report to relevant government departments (e.g., CAC, 2017b, article 13). “Classification” means that, for some platform services such as official accounts and group chats, platforms need to classify users into different categories according to factors such as the scale of account followers or group

⁶²China has a real-name registration policy for mobile phone numbers, which are connected to phone users’ identity card numbers. Thus, identity verifications can be carried out through checking users’ identity cards or mobile phone numbers. In reality, many platforms require users to provide both their identity cards and mobile phone numbers.

members and the content areas (such as political, economic, and entertainment). For accounts focusing on areas such as politics and current affairs, the management by platforms will be stricter. According to the CAC, the purpose of this “grading and classification” management system is for platforms to obtain the relevant data and enforce more “precise management” (Beijing Youth Daily, 2017, paragraph 8). A reasonable guess is that, “precise management” means that platforms should pay special attention to monitoring those online groups, official accounts, and individuals that may constitute a potential threat to the party-state. As Wang Shixi, a professor at Communication University of China specializing in Internet law, observes during a media interview (Xia and Zhang, 2018):

This management system will make the governance of users by Chinese websites or platforms more scientific and efficient. Of course, it also benefits the regulators in dealing with those who have breached relevant regulations [my translation].

It is obvious that the above-discussed several requirements, including the real-name registration and verification, real-time patrolling, and the “grading and classification” management system, have significant implications for platform surveillance, which will be discussed in the next section.

7.1.2 Regulation of platform content

Regulation of news content on platforms has posed some challenges to the Chinese party-state. This is partly because in the platform era, news sources and opinions available to news consumers have been greatly diversified (see section 5.1.2). Also, platform algorithms, designs and policies have influenced news production in a profound way (see section 5.2.1), leading to the existence of more “harmful content” on platforms. Here, “harmful” content refers to content that is harmful to the party-state’s public opinion control, which mainly includes politically harmful content, vulgar content, and rumours. This sub-section focuses on the regulation of these three types of content.

Politically harmful content

Politically harmful content (or politically sensitive content) is at the core of China's online content regulation in relation to public opinion control, given such content is directly linked to China's social stability and the party-state's legitimacy to rule. While it is not easy to draw a line around what is classified as "politically harmful content" in China, the earlier version of PAINIS (SCIO and MIIT, 2005), which has listed eleven types of content that are not allowed on the Internet, can give us a rough picture about where the "red lines" of politically harmful content lie in China:

- (1) opposing the "basic principles"⁶³ laid down in China's Constitution, laws, or regulations;
- (2) jeopardizing state security, leaking state secrets, subverting state power or sabotaging the unity of the state;
- (3) damaging national honor and national interests;
- (4) inciting ethnic hostility or racial discrimination, or disrupting ethnic unity;
- (5) damaging national religion policies and propagating feudal superstitions;
- (6) spreading rumours, disrupting social order and stability;
- (7) disseminating gambling, instigating others to commit offences;
- (8) publicly insulting or defaming others and harming the reputation or interests of others;
- (9) inciting illegal assembly, demonstration, protest, and disturbing social order;
- (10) organizing activities in the name of illegal non-government organization; or
- (11) other content prohibited by Chinese laws or regulations [my translation]⁶⁴

⁶³The so-called "Four Basic Principles" include adhering to the socialist road and adhering to the leadership of the CCP. See: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64156/64157/4509599.html>

⁶⁴My translation is based on the English translation of Liang and Lu (2010:106), with added articles and some changes.

Among the above list, except for the seventh and eighth types of content, all other listed types of content fall into the category of “politically harmful content”. However, in practice, the boundary or “red lines” of politically harmful content is not clear-cut in China. As my interviewee IE-14 observes:

To be politically correct, there are issues that the media are not allowed to challenge. Such issues include maintaining social stability and not to incite religious or ethnic conflicts and confrontations between different classes. However, it is often not that clear where the “red lines” lie in relation to the coverage of breaking news and major incidents [my translation].

—IE-14, senior editor of a central news organization, 2018

That is to say, while there are some areas (such as not to subvert state power or to incite ethnic conflicts) where the “red lines” are clear, there still exists much vagueness in reality. Although this vagueness may be the party-state’s purposeful strategy to invite more self-censorship (as discussed in section 7.1.1), it has also opened some space for boundary-testing activities. Chinese news organizations, especially the marketized media, have been testing the reporting “boundary” (Gang and Bandurski, 2011:41). As Wu (2000) noted, media commercialization had driven Chinese newspapers to keep testing the line drawn by the state for judging what is politically permissible, as they had to expand their circulations to make money; and “political taboos are often eye-catching topics for news stories”(p. 62). However, as discussed in section 6.2.2, in recent years, the party-state under the leadership of Xi Jinping has strengthened the control over news organizations, which means the space for news organizations to carry out boundary-testing is narrowed.

Compared to news organizations, self-media operators are often “bolder” in voicing their opinions (see section 5.3.2), which means that they sometimes may go beyond the “red lines”. This is why, in recent years, the party-state has been targeting some defiant self-media opinion leaders. Since 2013, the party-state has strengthened the crack-down on Weibo “Big Vs” (meaning verified Weibo accounts with over 100,000 followers, see section 6.1.2),

which has led to the decline of the dynamics of online opinion leaders (Wu et al., 2014; People's Daily Online, 2018c). For example, in February 2016, the Weibo accounts of some influential opinion leaders (including a famous actor, several journalists, and a retired real-estate mogul) were ordered to be permanently closed by the regulator CAC, on the grounds that they opposed the basic principles set in the constitution, harmed national interests, spread rumours, disturbed social order, and others (Shen, 2016; The Paper, 2016). According to the above list of not-allowed content, these accusations fell into at least three types of politically harmful content: the first (opposing the basic principles), the third (harming national interests) and the sixth (spreading rumours and disturbing social order). In other words, the relevant accounts crossed the “red lines” set by the party-state and thus were permanently closed.

Among the closed accounts was the one run by Ren Zhiqiang, former chairman of a Chinese major state-owned estate enterprise with over 37 million followers, whose comments about housing prices and other social issues often made the news headlines. What directly caused the closure of his Weibo account was his response to the words of President Xi, who emphasized that “All the Party media must be surnamed the Party” at a symposium in February 2016 (see section 6.2.2). Ren commented on his Weibo account: “When all the media just represent the Party and not represent the people anymore, the people are abandoned in a forgotten corner [my translation]”. Ren’s comment drew great attention online and was soon criticized by official media. In May 2016, Ren’s CCP membership was given one year probation for violating the party’s political discipline (Shen, 2016).

Vulgar content and rumours

Although the focus of China’s online content regulation is the above-discussed politically harmful content, the prevalence of vulgar content (e.g., pornographic, obscene and violence content) and rumours (yaoyan or 谣言, meaning purposely misleading information, similar to disinformation and false information)⁶⁵ has also become a major issue in terms of content

⁶⁵There are different terms to describe purposely misleading information in China, such as rumours, “xujia xinxi” (虚假信息, literally means fake or false information), and “bushi xinxi” (不实信息, literally means untrue information). These terms are often used interchangeably in China,

regulation in the platform era. For example, in November 2018, the central online content regulator the CAC summoned major platforms and required them to tackle the “chaotic situation” around self-media. The listed types of problematic content from self-media mainly include: intentionally distorting history of the CCP, defaming war heroes, spreading rumours, spreading pornography, and so on (Global Times, 2018). As a result, 9,800 self-media accounts were punished across platforms, and platforms including WeChat and Weibo vowed to provide a “healthier” environment for their users (Ibid.). In this example, it is obvious that both politically harmful content (such as distorting the CCP’s history and defaming war heroes) and vulgar content and rumours were targeted by China’s Internet regulators. It is worth noting that rumours that have the potential to disturb social order or stability are often classified as politically harmful content in China (as shown in the above list about not-allowed content). However, according to the 2018 Online Rumours Governance Report released by Tencent, the most common types of rumours on Chinese platforms are about food security, medical issues and health, and people’s livelihood (Xiao and Cao, 2019).

There are at least two main reasons behind the party-state’s attention to vulgar content and rumours. First, the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours on platforms may have some negative implications for the party-state’s public opinion guidance. This is because, while such content attracts the attention of many news consumers and thus draws them away from politically harmful content, it can at the same time discourage news consumers from accessing messages from the party-state. As my interviewee IE-11 comments:

Platform algorithms will make people consume more vulgar content, and thus less ideological propaganda content [from the party-state]. That is why government regulators have punished many platforms for the prevalence of vulgar content [my translation].

though they may not have exactly the same meanings. So far, “rumours” (or “yaoyan”) is the most used term. Almost all Chinese major platforms have established their rumour-reporting-and-refuting mechanisms (谣言举报及辟谣机制). In this thesis, terms like “rumours”, “disinformation” (widely used in the Western contexts), “fake information” and “false information” are used interchangeably, as a more nuanced differentiation between them is beyond the focus of this project.

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

That is to say, while vulgar content and rumours on platforms do not seem to be an immediate challenge to the party-state's public opinion control, they may cause some long-term damage to the spreading and consumption of the messages from the party-state. A similar situation has been witnessed in the West. For example, As BuzzFeed Media Editor Craig Silverman found out, in the months before American president election in 2016, the number of likes and shares for posts from sites that produce a lot of misleading and false news was "on average nearly 19 times higher than for posts from a mainstream news outlet such as CNN" (Bell et al., 2017:14).

Another reason behind such concern is that, the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours on platforms is against the party-state's morality-based discourses about Internet governance. As Jiang (2010) argues, the party-state has legalized Internet control through efforts including "claiming a moral high ground" and framing Internet governance as benevolence and protection (p.80). In other words, the Chinese party-state resorts to moral authority to reinforce its political power (Cui and Wu, 2016). Therefore, it is easy to understand why the party-state has required online news providers to build a "positive and healthy" online environment (e.g., CAC, 2017a), and has called for news producers and news consumers to spread "positive energy" online. As Bandurski (2015) observes, the term "positive energy" is "at the very heart of political discourse in the Xi Jinping era, having direct implications for media and Internet control" (paragraph 2). That is, the morality-based discourses of the party-state are a tool by which to legitimize and exert Internet control.

For the above-discussed reasons, the party-state has been strengthening its control over vulgar content and rumours in recent years. Major platforms have been frequently summoned by the media and Internet regulators on the grounds of hosting vulgar content and/or rumours and failing in guiding public opinion. For example, in June 2017, Cyberspace Administration of Beijing (CAB) summoned major online platforms/Internet companies (such

as Tencent, Weibo, Toutiao, Netease, and Baidu) and ordered them to take measures to tackle the vulgar and sensational coverage of celebrity scandals and ostentatious lifestyles. These platforms were also required to “actively propagate core socialist values, and create an ever-more healthy environment for the mainstream public opinion” (Reuters, 2017, paragraph 4). Within days of the summoning, 60 popular entertainment official accounts (some with millions of followers) were closed across different platforms (Ibid.).

Not only being required to take measures to tackle “harmful” content, Chinese platforms have been frequently punished by the regulators. For example, in September 2017, China’s three most popular social media platforms WeChat, Weibo, and Baidu Tieba (an online forum) were found by the CAC to contain harmful information such as violence or terror, false information or rumours, and obscenity or pornography, and thus they had breached the *Cyber Security Law* (which took effect on 1 June 2017) and threatened the “national security, public safety and social order”. All three social media platforms were fined (though the specific amount not disclosed) and required to rectify their practices (GBTIMES, 2017).

Among China’s major platforms, Toutiao is a prominent example for being frequently summoned and punished by the regulators. For example, in December 2017, executives from Toutiao and Phoenix News (a news app) were summoned by CAB for spreading vulgar content, and part of their services was ordered to suspend updating (Huang, 2017). This was the first time that part of the services of two popular news platforms was temporarily suspended. In April 2018, four of China’s most popular news aggregating platforms including Toutiao, Phoenix News, Netease News and Tiantian Kuaibao were ordered by the authority to be taken down from app stores for various periods. Among them, Toutiao was removed for three weeks, longer than the suspension of the other three platforms (suspended for three days to two weeks) (Hersey, 2018). Just one day after the taking-down order, China’s Radio and TV regulator SART⁶⁶ ordered Toutiao to close its Neihan Duanzi

⁶⁶While the CAC has overall authority over China’s online content, the SART has regulatory authority over online audio and video programs.

app (a popular joke app) permanently on the grounds of “hosting vulgar content” and “wrong orientation” (Reuters, 2018). The response of Toutiao will be discussed in section 8.3.

Under pressure from the government, Chinese platforms have not only closed or punished (e.g., suspending for a limited time) numerous self-media accounts, as required by the Internet content regulators (as exemplified above), they have also taken active measures to tackle harmful content on their sites. Such measures include hiring more human moderators and taking the initiative to combat rumours (which will be discussed in section 8.1). During the process, Chinese platforms are not only cooperating but also collaborating with the party-state, given that they are taking initiatives and active measures in governing their sites. This argument will be expanded in the next chapter.

7.1.3 Limitation on private capital

With platforms increasingly sitting at the centre of China’s news sphere, the private ownership of major platforms has become a concern within China, as evidenced in the “Xu Shiping vs. Tencent” case (see chapter 1) and “Zhao Wei event” (see section 2.1.1). As this sub-section will show, although the party-state has driven news organizations and state departments to embrace private platforms to engage with the public (see section 5.1) and has incorporated them within its system of public opinion guidance (see section 6.2.2), the influence of private capital on news and public opinion has always been on the radar of China’s media and Internet control. This sub-section will discuss how the party-state has been controlling the influence of private capital in news sphere.

Limitation on key news areas

As discussed in section 2.2.2, although the party-state has gradually lowered the entry barriers for private capital to participate in cultural and media businesses (e.g., allowing it to hold controlling shares in film and television production), it has been maintaining its tight control over the news sphere. Such control is embodied in two areas. Firstly, the government is still holding

controlling shares of almost all news outlets. Secondly, private capital is still banned from gathering and producing news in key areas (i.e., public affairs and breaking social incidents) that have more implications for public opinion (CAC, 2017a). That is why private news providers are only eligible to apply for a news re-publishing licence and/or a communication platform service licence, rather than a news gathering and publishing licence (article 6).

In recent years, the party-state has slightly loosened the control over ownership of news outlets. According to the amended PAINIS (CAC, 2017a), only news organizations and their “controlled subsidiaries” can apply for licences of gathering and publishing news in areas of public affairs and breaking social incidents. Here, “controlled subsidiaries” means news organizations hold “controlling shares”, which can be less than 50% of the overall shares but must be “sufficient to exert significant influence” on editorial decisions (CAC, 2017g, article 5). In contrast, the corresponding threshold for applying for a licence to gather and publish news in key areas was set at 51% in the earlier version of PAINIS (SCIO and MIIT, 2005, article 6). As discussed in section 2.2.2, private Internet companies such as Alibaba have invested in many news outlets or developed partnerships with them in recent years. In the case of *Beijing Hour*, a video news platform co-launched by Beijing TV (an official news organization) and the private Internet company Qihu 360, the latter was even allowed to hold the majority shares. However, such a development does not necessarily mean private capital now has more influence on the editorial decisions of news outlets. This is because PAINIS (CAC, 2017a) further stipulates that, online news providers should separate their news gathering and production services from commercial businesses, and non-public capital is not allowed to participate in the former services (CAC, 2017a, article 8).

The limitation on private capital in news gathering and production in key areas has so far been maintained. A typical example for such limitation concerns Pear Video, a private video-based news platform launched in November 2016.⁶⁷ Pear Video was founded by Qiu Bing, who is the founder

⁶⁷Pear Video accepted an investment of 167 million Yuan from the official People’s Daily Online

of *The Paper* (an influential digital news outlet based in Shanghai) and former editor-in-chief of *Oriental Morning Post*. In February 2017, Pear Video, which is registered in Beijing, was inspected by the local Internet content regulator CAB and other law enforcement institutions. According to CAB, Pear Video was found to have produced exclusive political news videos without a licence and thus was ordered to overhaul its business. Just days later, Qiu Bing announced in a letter that Pear Video would transform its content focus, “from focusing on political and breaking news to focusing on young people’s lives, thoughts, feelings, and so on” (Sina Tech, 2017). The example of Pear Video shows that private platforms, even headed by senior media professionals like Qiu Bing, are strictly limited in producing news in certain key areas.

Given that most major private platforms like WeChat do not produce their own content, the above limitation on original news gathering and production means that platforms have to check the qualifications of their users. In other words, platforms have to ensure news producers without a relevant licence cannot publish news content in the controlled key areas. This has become a major part of platforms’ responsibilities in governing their sites, which will be further discussed in the next section.

“Special management shares”

To strengthen the control over private platforms, the party-state has experimented with the so-called “special management share” (特殊管理股) initiative on several private platforms in recent years. The initiative means that the government takes a small share (say 1-2%) of private platforms, but that share gives the government or its representative absolute control over their content (Li, 2017b). In 2017, this initiative was included in the amended PAINIS, which states that “special management share” initiative will be implemented on “eligible” online news providers (article 6). In October 2017, the Internet content regulator CAC, together with the official news website *People’s Daily Online*, took less than 2% stakes of Yidian Zixun (a private mobile news aggregating platform) and *Tiexue.net* (a portal website focusing

in 2017. However, the popular video news platform is still mostly owned by private capital.

on military content). In exchange, the investors appointed a government official to each company's board, who has the veto power over their editorial decisions (Ibid.). Such an arrangement means that although the Chinese government, as the media and Internet regulator, has already held overseeing power over private platforms, this "special management share" initiative would grant it a direct control over editorial issues of private platforms.

It is not clear yet whether and how this "special management share" initiative will be applied to larger platforms like WeChat and Weibo. A news report from the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2017 disclosed that the Chinese government had discussed this issue with Internet giants Tencent, Alibaba, and a few other companies (Li, 2017b). However, there are at least a number of concerns for the party-state to make such a move. Firstly, even taking a small share of these companies would mean a significant amount of money (e.g., as of June 2019, the market values of Tencent and Alibaba were both around 400 billion dollars)⁶⁸. Secondly, as discussed earlier (see section 2.1.1), most Chinese major Internet companies are publicly listed in New York or Hong Kong, they would have to change their charters to allow the Chinese government to hold the "special management share" (Iseemedia, 2017). Thirdly, such a move may damage the reputation of Chinese Internet companies, strengthening the perception that Chinese Internet companies are strictly controlled by the party-state.

In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese private platforms have accepted the investment of the government regulators or state-controlled news organizations (state media as the representative of the government), or even voluntarily or actively offered a small "special" share to state-controlled media. A prominent example in this area is the rising platform Fun Headlines (趣头条). After receiving investments from two official media organizations, *People's Daily Online* and *The Paper*, Fun Headlines announced in its IPO registration file in September 2018 that it would offer an extra 1% "special share" to *The Paper* at a very low price, and *The Paper* would have the right

⁶⁸The market values of Tencent and Alibaba are based on the data from Statista. See: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/277483/market-value-of-the-largest-internet-companies-worldwide/> (Accessed 18 August 2019).

to appoint a board member to the platform (Beijing News, 2018). It is easy to see that the “special share” arrangement of Fun Headlines is quite like that of the above-discussed examples of Yidian Zixun and Tiexue.net.

The main reason why some private platforms are willing to accept the “special share” arrangement is that this may increase their chance in obtaining an INIS licence. A precedent is Yidian Zixun. In October 2017, shortly after receiving the investment from the CAC and *People’s Daily Online*, Yidian Zixun became the first private mobile news platform that obtained an INIS licence (Huanqiu.com, 2017a).⁶⁹ As discussed earlier, most private platforms do not have an INIS licence yet, casting a shadow over their future.

The above-discussed limitations over private platforms have shown that, although the party-state has incorporated private platforms within its system of public opinion guidance (see section 6.2.2), it still treats private platforms differently from official online news providers. As my interviewee IE-08 comments:

Official media are still the government’s “own son”, and we are only the “adopted son”. If an official media made serious mistakes, possible punishment would be replacing the editor-in-chief [...]. For us, possible punishment may be the suspension or closure of our business. That’s why I now feel much more pressure than before [my translation].

—IE-08, senior executive of a popular private platform and former executive of an official media, 2017

The above “own son vs. adopted son” metaphor, echoed by some of my other interviewees, has shown the different relations of the state with news organizations and private platforms. This metaphor used by my interviewees has also provided evidence for the party-state’s “paternalistic” attitudes regarding Internet governance (Li, 2009). This “paternalistic” approach will be further discussed in section 8.1.2.

⁶⁹Yidian’s licence covers both news re-publishing service and communication platform service.

7.2 Governance *through* Chinese platforms

As mentioned above, while maintaining strict control over private platforms, the Chinese party-state has explicitly required platforms to take the “main responsibilities” in governing their sites (e.g., CAC, 2016a). In other words, the party-state has outsourced Internet governance mainly to private platforms, which are carrying out the daily work of governing their sites. This new governance approach is what I call *governance through platforms*. This section examines the main features, some existing problems and a crucial instrument (i.e., surveillance) of this new governance approach.

7.2.1 Features of governance through platforms

As DeNardis and Hackl (2015) note, Internet governance studies have “primarily focused on governmental policies and new global institutions” and it is necessary to pay more attention to the “direct policymaking role of private intermediaries” (p.761). This observation is also true for studies of China’s Internet governance. Many studies have discussed the role of the party-state in Internet governance (e.g., Yang, 2011; Yang and Mueller, 2014) or how Internet companies censor their sites, mainly through keyword filtering, to meet the requirements of the party-state (e.g., Bamman, O’Connor and Smith, 2012; MacKinnon, 2009). In contrast, only very few studies have started to pay some attention to the role of Chinese private platforms in Internet governance (e.g., Xie and Xiu, 2017). This sub-section will make contribution in this area by discussing the main features of platform governance in China.

A different governance environment

One feature of platform governance is that platforms are facing a governance environment very different from the pre-platform era. Firstly, the so-called “problem of scale” has been a prominent issue for platforms in enforcing content governance, as there is “simply too much content and activity being posted” (Gillespie, 2017a:15-16). For example, according to Toutiao, around 500,000 pieces of content are uploaded per day onto the platform (The Paper, 2018b). Such a scale of content posted makes it impossible for Chinese

platforms to moderate each piece of content before publishing. As my interviewee IE-11 acknowledges:

We can't censor or ensure the quality of each piece produced by self-media, as hundreds of thousands of pieces are uploaded per day [...]. Censoring content piece by piece can only happen within traditional media organizations [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

The inability to moderate each piece of content before it is published means that most Chinese platforms have to adopt the “publish-then-filter” model of content moderation (see section 3.2.2), although they are explicitly held responsible for the content they host. Obviously, this content-moderation model may lead to more problematic content on platforms and bring challenges to the party-state's public opinion control, which will be discussed later.

Secondly, the rise of self-media as an important news actor has diversified news sources and opinions available on platforms, making self-media the focus of platforms' governance over news content. In contrast, in the pre-platform era, China's Internet governance was centered on content produced by news outlets.⁷⁰ Compared to the governance over news outlets, the governance over self-media is much more challenging, as shown in the above-discussed “chaotic” situation around self-media (see section 7.1.2). This is mainly because many self-media operators do not have any professional media trainings; their content often has not undergone strict editorial processes; and they tend to be “bolder” in expressing their opinions (see chapter 5).

It is worth noting that, in addition to self-media, platforms also hold governance power, at least in principle, over the content from news outlets published within their sites, as exemplified in the “Xu Shiping vs. Tencent”

⁷⁰This is because commercial websites like Sina and Sohu were not allowed to produce original content in key areas, and the Chinese Internet content regulator maintains a looser control on user-generated content.

case (see chapter 1). Commenting on this case, my interviewee IE-04 observes:

The incident was about WeChat's rules [...]. When you open an account on WeChat, the platform has its say over your account. If you don't agree with its rules, you'd better not operate on it [...]. This is the reality you have to accept. On platforms, traditional media organizations hold little power [my translation].

—IE-04, vice director of a major radio news channel, 2017

While news organizations may feel the governance power of platforms, as shown in the words of Xu Shiping of *eastday.com* and my interviewee IE-04, such power is relatively limited in reality. Take Weibo as an example. Its policy document, *Weibo Community Agreements*, sets up the rules regarding how news media accounts are governed (Weibo, 2017):

Article 19: On Weibo, news media accounts refer to verified accounts run by licenced news organizations. They are governed by media regulators and online content regulators [my translation].

Article 21.2: The hosts of current affairs and political topics are mainly news media accounts and other eligible accounts. They should undertake the managing responsibilities for their social assets on Weibo, which mainly include moderating and deleting relevant content and comments on their pages [my translation].

Article 41: If Weibo users think news media accounts have spread rumours, they can report to media regulators and online content regulators [my translation].

According to the above policies of Weibo, news media accounts on Weibo are actually governed by government regulators, rather than the platform; news media themselves, rather than Weibo, are responsible for managing content and comments on their account pages; even complaints about news

media accounts should be directed to the regulators, not the platform. Although different platforms have different policies regarding the governance of news media accounts (for example, WeChat commissions third parties to handle users' complaints, see chapter 1), most Chinese platforms are unwilling to undertake the responsibility of governing content from news organizations. As my interviewee IE-11 comments:

We don't moderate the content from news organizations. Why should we? They all hold licences for producing news. We only have limited resources, and we want to spend them on more urgent areas: moderating the content from self-media [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

The above quotation from my interviewee IE-11 also shows, in the eyes of Chinese platforms, online content governance is mainly a responsibility, rather than a type of power. This supports my argument that online content governance enforced by platforms is largely state governance *through* platforms.

Governance through platform rules

Another main feature of governance through platforms is that platforms promulgate their own governance rules, subject to relevant laws and regulations (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Hintz, 2016). Governance rules of platforms often take the form of terms of services, user agreement, community standards, and so on (Gillespie, 2018a). For example, the major governance framework of Weibo is the above-mentioned *Weibo Community Agreements*, which sets out the rules about what content and user behaviours are not allowed on Weibo and how various types of accounts are governed. In addition to the *WeChat Terms of Service*, WeChat has also promulgated its *WeChat Official Account Admin Platform User Agreement*, which focuses on the management of its Official Account Platform. Similarly, Toutiao has promulgated *Toutiaohao Platform Operation Norms* and *Publishing Norms for Toutiaohao Authors*, setting out detailed norms for its Toutiaohao platform (or official account platform).

For Chinese platforms, their content governance mainly serves two purposes: first, to fulfill their “main responsibilities” in governing their sites required by the party-state; second, to safeguard their commercial interests by satisfying their users and advertisers through measures such as maintaining a healthy platform environment. For the first purpose, Chinese platforms have integrated the relevant requirements from the state into their own governance rules. For example, all Chinese platforms have explicitly stated that the eleven types of content listed in the PAINIS (SCIO and MIIT, 2005) are not allowed on their sites (see section 7.1.2). Moreover, given that only news organizations are permitted to gather and produce news in public affairs and breaking social incidents in China, an important part of the governance rules of platforms is to state that individual authors and private entities are not allowed to publish news content in these key areas (e.g., Toutiao, n.d.-b, article 1.4; article 2.2.8.4).

However, it is worthy of pointing out that, in practice, some rules are not always strictly enforced by Chinese platforms. For instance, although individuals are not permitted to produce news content in areas like politics and current affairs, some self-media have published many news commentaries in these areas. Take the self-media account *Sun Liping Society Observe* as an example. The topics covered in recent years by the account, run by Sun Liping, a famous sociology professor of Tsinghua University, include nationalism, populism, China’s development, market and democracy, economic-reform-related issues, tax cuts, environmental issues, China-US relations, and some more specific topical cases. Obviously, many of these topics are politics related.⁷¹ This gap between the rules of platforms and their governance practices reflects the difficulties or problems in content governance (see next sub-section) and a certain degree of flexibility of platforms in exercising governance.

⁷¹According to my own observation, although Sun Liping generally does not criticize the party-state in a straightforward way, he does express his views on many topical issues through discussing similar historical issues or similar cases happened in foreign nations. In many of his articles or audios, readers can detect his disapproval of some current policies in China.

To fulfill their second purpose, platforms also promulgate rules to suit their own services or to appeal to their users. As discussed earlier, according to the rules of WeChat, subscription-type official accounts generally can publish only once per day with the maximum of eight articles, in order to maintain better content quality of official accounts and better user experience (see section 5.2.1 for the rationale for this limitation). Another example is the different rules of different platforms concerning user comment management. WeChat has outsourced user comment management to official account operators, who are allowed to choose which comments to be shown within their accounts (qq.com, 2018). That is to say, user comments shown within WeChat official accounts are actually moderated by official account operators themselves. Obviously, such a policy appeals to many news producers, as it grants them more control over the content displayed within their official accounts. In comparison, Weibo differentiates between different types of account operators regarding user comment management: for accounts run by news media and government departments, the responsibility of user comment management is with account operators; for other types of accounts, user comment moderation is carried out by the platform (Weibo, 2017). Weibo's policy on user comment management not only demonstrates its willingness to respect the authority of state departments and news organizations, but also reduces much of its burden in content moderation.

The above examples show that in terms of governing their sites, platforms are clearly the rule-setters, albeit subject to the requirements of the state. These rules promulgated by private platforms certainly have implications for China's online public opinion. For example, WeChat's policy on user comment moderation means that on WeChat, user comments are just a manufactured or staged representation of public opinion. For Weibo, to grant news media accounts and state accounts the privilege of moderating their user comments, it has granted these institutions the privilege of manipulating public opinion.

Governance mechanisms of platforms

Unlike China's Internet content governance in the pre-platform era, which mainly relies on keywords filtering (MacKinnon, 2009), governance through platforms adopts a variety of mechanisms. In addition to keyword filtering, platforms also use large-scale human moderation, algorithms and user flagging or reporting in their content governance. Among them, automatic keyword filtering, normally complemented by human moderators, has been a major part of China's domestic Internet control. As discussed in section 2.2, all relevant websites and platforms in China are required to install the keyword filtering system. That is to say, even most Chinese platforms have to adopt the afore-mentioned "publish-then-filter" model; keyword filtering has been a constant mechanism of all Chinese platforms. In the example of "Zhao Wei event" (see section 2.1.1), a Weibo post from the CYL account was initially deleted and thus raised concerns about the power of private capital over a CCP institution in China. However, Weibo later explained that the deletion was due to automatic filtering triggered by a certain keyword in the post.

Although human moderation has always been a part of China's Internet governance, its scale in the platform era is unprecedented. A prominent example is Toutiao. The company announced in January 2018 that it would hire 2,000 more content moderators, making its total number of content moderators to around 6,000 (The Paper, 2018b). Only three months later, the company announced that it would increase its in-house human moderators to around 10,000, the largest number of in-house moderators in China (Bytedance, 2018). Other Chinese platforms have also been increasing their content moderators or supervisors. For instance, Weibo disclosed in May 2019 that it planned to expand its team of Weibo supervisors (微博监督员) from 2,000 and 4,000.⁷² Unlike Toutiao's in-house content moderators, Weibo supervisors are voluntary Weibo users who report problematic content (such as pornographic, illegal, and politically sensitive content) to the platform, and Weibo rewards those whose work has met its requirements

⁷²See relevant reports: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1634835820306370754&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed 8 July 2019).

some free services and limited cash subsidies.⁷³ It is worth mentioning that Western platforms like Facebook and YouTube are also hiring large numbers of human moderators. It was reported that Facebook and Alphabet's YouTube division had plans to increase their human moderators to 20, 000 and 10, 000 respectively by the end of 2018 (Lev-Ram, 2018).

Algorithmic governance is a governance mechanism unique to platforms. For example, Toutiao adopts a "double moderation" principle in its content moderation, which means all content produced within its Toutiaohao platform goes through the machine moderation first, and then content flagged by machines would go through human moderation (Toutiao, n.d.-b, article 2.1). Compared to human moderation, algorithmic governance is much more efficient. As Li Tong, Toutiao's vice editor-in-chief, noted in January 2018 during an interview with *The Paper*, a human moderator can usually deal with around 1000 articles per day, while machines can do the same amount of job within 10 seconds (The Paper, 2018b). However, algorithmic governance also has its own limits, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

Platform users are also a part of the mechanisms of platform governance. The "publish-then-filter" model of content moderation means that most Chinese platforms mainly rely on users' flagging or reporting to identify potentially problematic content. For example, many articles on WeChat are deleted within hours. For those deleted articles, users can only see a brief notice stating that based on users' complaints, the relevant article is deemed to have breached *Provisions for the Administration of Internet Users' Official Accounts Information Services* (CAC, 2017b) and thus cannot be shown (see Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1: A screenshot of a deleted article on WeChat

⁷³According to Weibo's requirements, Weibo supervisors have to report no less than 200 pieces of problematic content per month and the rate of reporting accuracy no lower than 98%. See: <https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404248604935062251&sudaref=www.google.com&display=0&retcode=6102> (accessed 8 July 2019).



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That is to say, while the party-state has outsourced Internet governance to platforms, the latter has further outsourced part of it to news consumers. As Gillespie (2018b) notes, by outsourcing some of the moderation labor to users, platforms have turned the entire population of users to “amateur editors and police” (p.201). In China, user flagging is often combined with algorithms and human moderators in content governance. As my interviewee IE-05 discloses:

As there is too much content to be reviewed, we mainly rely on users to flag problematic content. If the number of user complaints about a piece of content reaches certain thresholds, we will degrade it and recommend it [through algorithms] to less people or simply delete it. Some pieces will be forwarded to human moderators for further reviewing [my translation].

—IE-05, senior executive of a major platform, 2017

7.2.2 Problems of governance through platforms

As discussed above, targeting platforms and requiring them to govern their sites is a more efficient approach of Internet governance compared to targeting individuals and individual websites, as platforms do have the means to intervene and policing a major platform is a “resource intensive and relentless undertaking” (Gillespie, 2018b: 198). However, this new approach of Internet governance cannot solve all the problems in terms of public opinion control for the Chinese party-state. Here, “problems” are discussed from the point of view of the party-state.

Circumventing keyword filtering

The first problem with this governance approach is that while keyword filtering is a basic governance mechanism of platforms (as discussed above), many platform users (referring to both end-users and news producers) have developed skills in circumventing the keyword-filtering algorithms of Chinese platforms. For example, using homophones of censored keywords to avoid certain content being blocked is one commonly used method. Hiruncharoenvate, Lin and Gilbert (2015) have found out that homophone-transformed Weibo posts can stay on-site three times longer than their previously censored counterparts; for these homophone-transformed messages, 99% native Chinese speakers can understand their intended meanings (p.150). Another common way to avoid keyword filtering is to use audios and pictures rather than texts. For example, on 22 August 2018, the above-mentioned self-media operator Sun Liping published an article on his WeChat official account, explaining why he published content in the form of audios rather than texts. One of the reasons he gave was that, compared to texts, audios were more likely to circumvent the keyword filtering of platforms (Sun, 2018).

To circumvent keyword filtering, some self-media operators write in a veiled way. Popular self-media *Sixgod*, run by Wang Xiaolei (a former journalist from *Xinhua News Agency*), is a good example. *Sixgod* usually comments on current affairs by using stories and characters from the Chinese wuxia (martial arts and chivalry) novels written by Louis Cha (better known by his pen name “Jin Yong”). For example, in an article published on 5 May 2016, titled *The era of no bad guy can be found* (找不到大恶人的时代), Wang wrote about the “Wei Zexi event”⁷⁴ and commented that after the death of Wei, a

⁷⁴“Wei Zexi event” (魏则西事件) was a major online social incident happened in 2016. Wei was a Chinese 21-year-old university student, who was diagnosed with a rare type of cancer and died after receiving an experiment treatment at a military hospital based in Beijing. Before his death, Wei posted an article on the Chinese Q & A website Zhihu that described his experience receiving the treatment. In the article, Wei accused Baidu of promoting false medical advertisement (which was not clearly differentiated from other content) and denounced the hospital for claiming high success rates for the treatment (the hospital was later found to have illegally working with notorious private healthcare businesses). The treatment cost Wei’s poor family around 200,000 Yuan. Wei’s article and his death drew great attention online and eventually led to an investigation by China’s online content regulator CAC, which imposed new restrictions on advertisements on search engines. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Wei_Zexi (Accessed 7 July 2019).

Chinese university student who died after receiving an experimental treatment promoted by the search engine Baidu, people were asking who were the bad guys: Was it Baidu, the hospital, or the private medical businesses? In this article, the author mentioned many bad guys from Jin Yong's novels, but commented that the real or the biggest bad guy was the one who was behind all those bad guys. While the article did not state that the Chinese government was responsible for regulating the relevant "bad guys" in this case, this intended meaning was quite clear (Sixgod, 2016). It is worth pointing out that this strategy—writing in "hidden messages"—has been adopted by China's earlier generation of bloggers, who deployed "subtle forms of political expression" such as satire, euphemisms, literary allusions, and coded phrases to convey critical messages (Esarey and Xiao, 2008:752).

Flawed content moderation model

The second problem with the governance through platforms approach is linked to the "publish-then-filter" model. As my interviewee IE-11 acknowledges:

There is just too much content on platforms [...]. You can see all kinds of disgusting content: false news, rubbish, pornographic content, and even politically harmful content [...]. This is the biggest problem for China's Internet government [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

That is to say, due to the so-called "problem of scale", it is almost impossible for even the most advanced Chinese platforms with the most sophisticated censoring technologies to moderate and block all "harmful" content before it gets published. Therefore, "harmful" content will inevitably exist on platforms. From the point of view of the party-state, this "publish-then-filter" model is obviously flawed in terms of public opinion control: although "harmful" content (such as politically sensitive content) may be deleted quickly by platforms, it may have already been read and shared widely among news consumers. In other words, if certain content is "harmful", then the "harm" may have already been done before the content gets removed from

platforms. In fact, in recent years, many online users have adapted their news consumption to this “publish-then-filter” model of platforms. As my interviewee IE-06 observes:

Given that many articles on platforms like WeChat will be quickly deleted, many savvy users have got used to downloading or making screenshots of sensitive articles even before they start to read them [...]. Some users have uploaded these articles to [more private] online forums [my translation].

—IE-06, senior editor of Xinhua News Agency, 2017

Apart from these common ways to get around content censorship, it is reported that, some Chinese users have even employed the technology behind Bitcoin to stamp relevant articles on the ethereum blockchain,⁷⁵ in order to ensure that they “could never be erased nor tampered with” (Zhai and Chen, 2018). That is to say, while users are an important part of the governance mechanisms of platforms, their resistance to content censorship also means the widely adopted “publish-then-filter” model of platform governance cannot stop the spreading of “harmful” content.

Imperfect governance mechanisms

Gillespie (2018a) suggested three “imperfect solutions” to the so-called “problem of scale” in the platform era: algorithms, human moderators, and platform users. These solutions are also imperfect in China’s context. The resistance of Chinese platform users (in the form of circumventing keyword censorship) has been discussed above, and the other two solutions have their own problems. In a media interview conducted in January 2018 with *The Paper*, Li Tong, Toutiao’s vice editor-in-chief, commented on the role of algorithms and human moderators in its content governance (The Paper, 2018b, paragraph 7):

⁷⁵A blockchain is a growing list of records which are linked using cryptography. By design, a blockchain is resistant to modification of the data. It is typically managed by a peer-to-peer network collectively adhering to a protocol. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blockchain>

The problem of human moderation lies in its efficiency. If we leave the task of moderating all the 500, 000 piece of content uploaded each day to one human moderator, it would take him/her 500 days. In contrast, it takes our machines only 90 minutes to do so [...]. In judging vulgar content, human moderators can be subjective, while the machines also have limitations, as they would adopt a “sweeping” approach [my translation].

The above quotation shows that, for Toutiao, both algorithms and human moderators have their limitations in content governance. While algorithms may be efficient, they cannot tell the nuance of the content. For example, machines cannot differentiate artistic paintings or historic photos from pornographic content, as evidenced in the example that Facebook’s algorithm initially censored the iconic Vietnam War “napalm girl” photo in 2016 (O’Grady, 2016). In contrast, human moderators may be able to tell such nuance, but they can be subjective and inefficient. This is why Toutiao has adopted a differentiation policy in content moderation based on the types of content. According to Li Tong, some types of content such as advertisements and clickbait content can generally be moderated by machines, while other types of content, such as rumours, illegal information and pornographic content, still require the judgment of human moderators (The Paper, 2018b).

While human moderation is often seen as a remedy to the increasingly algorithmic information environment, there are some specific problems associated with human moderators of platforms. First, unlike editors in traditional media, platform moderators have to make difficult judgements under an extremely heavy workload. As shown in the case of Toutiao, human moderators often have to review around 1,000 pieces in one day, a workload impossible to imagine in traditional news organizations. In other words, platform moderators can only spend seconds to minutes on a piece of content. A second problem with human moderators of Chinese platforms is that they are often inexperienced in content moderation compared to editors of news organizations. These moderators are mainly young university graduates⁷⁶

⁷⁶According to Toutiao, the average age of its content moderators is 26 (The Paper, 2018b).

and are poorly or moderately paid (usually between 3,000 to 6,000 Yuan a month).⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, the quality of content moderation of private platforms like Toutiao has been questioned. As my interviewee IE-12, who mainly writes about financial analysis, comments:

I used to publish on Toutiao, but soon abandoned the platform. The main reason was that I found its content moderators didn't understand what I wrote [...]. That is why there is so much low-quality content on Toutiao [my translation].

—IE-12, senior editor of a central news organization and self-media operator, 2018

This situation is not limited to Toutiao, but common with almost all Chinese platforms. Acknowledging the overall poor quality of content moderation on Chinese platforms, my interviewee IE-11 comments:

You can't expect those moderators to have the judgment of an editor-in-chief. They are paid 3,000 Yuan [a month], you should not expect them to do the job that is paid 30,000 Yuan [...]. This is a main reason that has led to the decline of online content quality in China [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

7.2.3 Platform surveillance: a governance instrument

As discussed in section 3.2.2, surveillance is part of the governance power of platforms, which can be carried out for state control (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Hintz, 2016) as well as the commercial purposes of platforms (e.g., Zuboff, 2019). In this thesis, the focus of platform surveillance is on the former. That is, platforms carry out surveillance on behalf of the party-state. This sub-section argues that, platform surveillance has become a crucial instrument for China's Internet governance in the platform era.

⁷⁷See the recruitment information for content moderators of Toutiao. Available from: http://www.guancha.cn/society/2018_01_03_441624.shtml (Accessed 15 July 2019).

The collection of user data is an important part of platform surveillance. Given that Chinese platforms are required to adopt the real-name-registration-and-verification policy and carry out real-time patrolling of their sites (see section 7.1.1), they are legally collecting extensive user data, including users' personal data (e.g., name, address, phone number and location) and their online behaviour data (or users' digital trace left online). Here, users' behaviour data include: what articles and comments they have posted; what websites or articles they have browsed and for how long; whose posts they have liked/disliked, commented or shared; and so on. In addition, Chinese platforms have also accumulated huge amounts of "public data" (i.e., the interaction data between platform users and state departments). This is mainly because the party-state has encouraged party/government departments at various levels to open official accounts on private platforms to engage with the public (see section 5.1.1).

The above-discussed common requirements of platforms by the Chinese online content regulator CAC (section 7.1.1) have significant implications for platforms to carry out surveillance for the state. The real-name registration and verification policy means major platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao can legally ask their users to provide personal identifiable data, such as government-issued ID card numbers, names and phone numbers. Moreover, the requirement for real-time content patrolling and moderation means that, during the process, Chinese platforms can accumulate extensive data about the "digital trace" of their users. Furthermore, the "grading and classification" managing system has obvious implications for platform surveillance, given that it will force platforms to focus their monitoring resources on influential opinion leaders and online groups that discuss politically sensitive issues, which are among the main concerns of the party-state in terms of public opinion control.

While user data are hosted by Chinese platforms, they can be disclosed to the state, as required by relevant laws and regulations. For example, according to the PAINIS (CAC, 2017a), all INIS providers including platforms are

required to “cooperate” with government regulators (article 19, emphasis added):

Article 19: The national and local cyberspace administration offices should [...] legally exercise supervision and inspection over the activities of Internet News Information Services, and *relevant institutions and individuals must cooperate with such inspections* [my translation].

Similarly, China’s Cyber Security Law also requires all Internet network operators to cooperate with relevant security departments (NPC Standing Committee, 2016, article 28):

Article 28: Internet network operators should provide technological support and assistance to public security and national security departments for their activities in legally maintaining national security and detecting crimes.

Unsurprisingly, Chinese platforms explicitly state that users’ registration information can be disclosed to relevant state departments. For example, WeChat makes it clear to its users that their personal information may be shared with law enforcement agencies (WeChat, n.d.-c):

Law enforcement agencies like the courts, the procuratorates, and public security departments can access your registration information through Tencent according to relevant laws or regulations [my translation].

That is to say, Chinese users are under constant surveillance conducted by private platforms on behalf of the state, given that their personal identifiable information and their digital trace are recorded by platforms and such data can be shared with the state. As discussed in section 3.2.2, such constant surveillance is supposed to encourage “self-restraint and self-censorship” from platform users (Manokha, 2018a: 221), which is therefore beneficial to

the party-state's public opinion control. It is worth noting that although Chinese platforms are required to cooperate with relevant regulators and law enforcement departments, it does not necessarily mean that any Chinese government departments can easily access the user data held by private platforms. As a research report released by Shanghai Law Society (2018) notes, while some private platforms hold huge amounts of data that are of important value for the government to improve its administrative functions and public services, government departments generally cannot access such "public data" due to the lack of relevant laws or regulations.⁷⁸

In comparison, while Western platforms are also cooperating with governments under certain circumstances, as demonstrated in the Edward Snowden case in 2013, they do refuse government requests frequently. For example, Google publishes a detailed "Transparency Report" every six months since 2010 on how it has dealt with requests about content removal from governments around the world. It states that "We review these requests closely to determine if content should be removed because it violates a law or our product policies" (Google, 2017). For example, during the six-month period until 31 December 2017, Google received 988 content removing requests from the United States government, with 56% of the requested content being removed (Ibid.).

Compared to Western contexts, surveillance carried out by Chinese private platforms and the disclosure of user data to the state are generally less controversial, given that real-name registration and verification, real-time monitoring of user content and data disclosure to relevant government agencies are legally required in China. However, in the eyes of Chinese platform users, the surveillance by platforms is expected to be only over online *public* space (such as news aggregating sites, Weibo, online forums, and WeChat official accounts). Platform surveillance over online private space, such as WeChat chats and WeChat group chats, is still controversial in China, as shown in the below examples concerning WeChat.

⁷⁸Chinese current laws and regulations concerning data disclosure mainly relate to public opinion control or security issues.

In recent years, WeChat's suspected surveillance over private chats and group chats has drawn increasing attention in China. For example, in January 2019, WeChat's Big Data Report released by Tencent included the data about the most popular emojis for different age groups, which stirred suspicion that WeChat chats were under surveillance. In March 2019, journalists from *Southern Metropolis* ran several tests about the connections between the content of WeChat chats and the advertisements they received in their WeChat Top Story news feeds, and they arrived at the conclusion that WeChat had surveilled their private chats. However, WeChat has denied the surveillance accusation on both cases. It explained that the data about emojis were based on users' emoji-clicking behaviours, while the advertisements in users' Top Story news feeds were recommended according to users' profiles. During media interviews, WeChat has repeatedly emphasized that it does not surveil users' chats, and it does not store the records of private chats and all such records are stored only on users' own phones or computers (Wen, 2019; Yuan, 2019). While it is difficult to judge whether the statements from WeChat were completely true, these two cases have demonstrated Chinese users' concerns over the possible surveillance over their private space.

Chapter conclusion

This Chapter has examined governance *of* platforms and governance *through* platforms in China. In terms of governance *of* platforms, this chapter has focused on the Chinese government's regulation of platforms in three aspects: adjustment of regulatory framework to target platforms, content regulation concerning platforms, and limitations on private capital in news sphere. It has shown that, the party-state has maintained a strict control over private platforms through constantly upgrading its regulations concerning platforms, pressuring platforms to combat "harmful" content (such as politically harmful content, vulgar content and rumours), and keeping a tight rein on the involvement of private capital in news sphere.

In terms of governance *through* platforms in China, this chapter has examined the features of platform governance (as opposed to state governance),

problems associated with platform governance, and surveillance as an instrument for Internet governance. It has demonstrated that due to the changing governance environment, especially the rise of self-media and the so-called “problem of scale”, the new governance approach is a natural and practical choice for the party-state. Also, platform governance has an obvious advantage: surveillance as an instrument, which can be used to invite more self-censorship from platforms users. However, governance *through* platforms is not a perfect solution for the state, as “harmful” content will inevitably exist in a platform environment and platform governance mechanisms (such as algorithms and human moderation) have their own limitations. These problems or challenges for the party-state regarding public opinion control will be further discussed in chapter 8.

Chapter 8: Towards a “collaborative governance” model in China

In addition to being forced to ensure that the government retains its monopoly on information, they [referring to tech giants] are now also being required to help make China a “cyber-superpower”, turning them into “quasi-state-owned companies”.

—*The Economist*, June 30-July 6, 2018

Introduction

As discussed in chapter 7, the Chinese party-state has maintained a strict control over private platforms through constantly upgrading regulations. However, state-platform relations in China go beyond not only the “regulator vs. regulated” model, but also beyond the news and public opinion sphere. This chapter will show that the Chinese party-state and private platforms have been collaborating with each other in both public opinion control and wider economic, social and technological areas. Just as the above quotation from *The Economist* observes, in addition to controlling the power of platforms concerning news and information, the party-state is also using Chinese platforms and the Internet companies to fulfill its goal of making China a “cyber-superpower”.

Wide collaboration between platforms and the party-state has led to at least two things. Firstly, the interests of the state and platforms are increasingly intertwined, consolidating the base for long-term and stable collaboration. Secondly, the party-state’s public opinion control is strengthened, given that platforms are collaborating, rather than just cooperating with the state. Here, the key difference between “cooperation” and “collaboration” is that the former refers to platforms *passively* working with the state to meet the state’s requirements of public opinion control; while the latter refers to platforms *actively* taking measures to satisfy the state and demonstrate their allegiance to the state. Based on such discussion, I argue for a “state-platform collaborative governance” model in relation to China’s public opinion control in the platform era. In this chapter, first, I will examine the state-platform

collaborations in public opinion control and wider contexts. Then, I will present my “collaborative governance” model and discuss its effectiveness in principle regarding public opinion control. Lastly, I shall examine the effectiveness of this model in reality and discuss the implications of some existing challenges for the party-state.

8.1 State-platform collaboration

This section examines state-platform collaboration in both public opinion control and wider areas. Although this thesis focuses on the implications of platforms for the party-state’s public opinion control, the examination of state-platform collaboration in wider areas helps to provide a holistic picture of state-platform relations and an explanation for the party-state’s tolerance of the challenges brought about by platforms in news and public opinion area. Moreover, state-platform collaboration in wider areas helps to consolidate the dominance of some major platforms in China’s market and expands their reservoir of user data, which has important implications for the state’s public opinion control.

8.1.1 Collaboration in public opinion control

During his speech at a high-profile symposium on “Cyber security and informatization” in April 2016, President Xi Jinping explicitly required China’s Internet regulators and Internet companies to “collaborate” with each other in online content governance:

As for online information governance, Internet companies should take the main responsibilities, while government regulators should strengthen their supervision and management. They should have a relationship of close *collaboration* and *coordination* [...]. Thus, China’s Internet governance shall open up a new path of *collaborative* management and positive interaction [my translation] (Gov.cn, 2016, emphasis added).

The above quotation from President Xi demonstrates that state-platform collaboration with regard to public opinion control is actually a state-driven

arrangement. Based on this arrangement, platforms should take the “main responsibilities” in content governance, while government regulators are mainly responsible for “supervision and management”; they should collaborate, coordinate and interact positively. Given that earlier chapters have discussed the party-state’s strategy in incorporating platforms within its public opinion guidance system (see section 6.2.2) and examined its new governance approach—governance *through* platforms (see section 7.2), this sub-section focuses on the platforms’ response: how platforms have been collaborating with the party-state regarding public opinion guidance and Internet governance respectively.

Collaboration in public opinion guidance

As discussed in section 6.2.2, the party-state has tried to incorporate private platforms within its system of public opinion guidance, such as including platforms in regular internal meetings and training sessions organized by relevant party and government departments. In response to such incorporating efforts, platforms have shown their willingness to collaborate with the party-state in public opinion guidance. For example, after attending an internal training session organized by UFWD in 2015, two senior platform executives were quoted as saying (The Paper, 2015):

Thanks to this training session, I understand more deeply about my position and mission [...]. We used to focus on technologies and did not have much experience in dealing with the [party-state] system. But we are absolutely patriotic and willing to accept the political guidance [my translation].

—Zhang Yiming, founder and CEO of Bytedance, 2015

[Because of the training,] I realized that knowing the speech boundaries and guiding public opinion are something that we, as Internet company executives, should pay much attention to [my translation].

—Ma Na, vice president of Tianya Forum⁷⁹, 2015

⁷⁹Tianya Forum (天涯论坛) is among China’s most popular online forums.

The above quotations from Zhang and Ma were both politically correct expressions in China's context, showing the obedience of private companies to the party-state. An interesting point from Zhang's words is that he emphasized his "patriotic" stance to show his willingness to collaborate with the state regarding public opinion control. As discussed in section 6.2.2, "patriotism" is regarded by President Xi as the most fundamental value among the so-called "socialist core values". In fact, not only the Chinese party-state, Western governments also send messages to platforms that they should be "patriotic", as one of the ways to pressure platforms to cooperate with the government (Balkin, 2017:1179). For example, in recent years, U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration officials have criticized Google for collaborating with Chinese military and at the same time having refused to support U.S. Defense Department programs, which has been likened to "treason". In addition to denying any involvement with Chinese military, Google CEO Sundar Pichai went to the White House in March 2019 to meet Trump and discussed with him about investing in the American workforce and Google's "ongoing commitment to working with the U.S. government" (Griffin, 2019, paragraph 11).

The above response from Chinese platform executives is easy to understand, given their long-term prosperity is largely contingent on their relations with the party-state. As my interviewee IE-11 observes:

In China, the first thing in running a media business is to understand the politics. In the past, it was "politicians run newspapers" [政治家办报].⁸⁰ Now it is "politicians run the websites and platforms". You need to understand not only the business, but also the politics [my translation].

—IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, 2018

⁸⁰The phrase "politicians run newspapers" was first raised by Mao Zedong in 1959, who emphasized that news articles, and especially editorials, must be responsible to the overall interests of the party, united closely with the political situation. See: http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgix/2007-01/06/content_5573234.htm

The above quotation is very helpful in understanding the main rationale behind the collaboration of Chinese platforms with the party-state. That is, any news-related business in China is not just a business, as it concerns public opinion and thus the legitimacy of the party-state to rule. Therefore, passive cooperation with the party-state is not enough, and the executives of platforms are supposed to think like “politicians” who understand well the key concerns of the party-state and guide public opinion accordingly.

In practice, Chinese platforms have demonstrated their collaboration with the state regarding public opinion guidance in various ways. Firstly, such collaboration has been seen in the content configuration of platforms. For example, in recent years, most major Chinese platforms like Weibo and Toutiao have launched a new channel called “New Era” (新时代, referring to the era of Xi Jinping). This channel aggregates content from major official news organizations and state accounts. As shown in Figure 8.1, the top three pieces of news on Toutiao’s New Era channel were from *China Central Television* (the first piece) and *People’s Daily* (the second and third pieces), and the picture was about President Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the 2019 Basketball World Cup.

Figure 8.1: A screenshot of Toutiao’s New Era channel (10 September 2019)



Secondly, major private platforms often display news reports about Chinese top leaders, especially President Xi Jinping, in the most prominent place (such

as placing it at the top of a page or channel), which is very similar to the displaying of such content on the front pages of official news websites or traditional newspapers (Young, 2013). For example, on Toutiao's "Recommendation" channel, the top two pieces of news articles, treated as sticky posts (meaning always staying at the top of the channel page), are always about President Xi Jinping and other news reports from central news organizations (see Figure 8.2). While it is not known whether displaying certain content in a prominent place on platforms will influence the public agenda or attitudes (since news consumers can neglect such content by not clicking it, just as many Chinese readers have skipped over newspaper front pages), such practices of platforms have shown that private platforms can be used by the state as a propaganda tool.

Figure 8.2: A screenshot of Toutiao's recommendation channel (2 September 2019)



Thirdly, platforms often use human intervention in spreading the key messages from the party-state. A prominent example is how Chinese platforms intervened in the news distribution regarding the CCP's 19th

National Congress.⁸¹ From days before the opening of the Congress on 18 October 2017, Toutiao created a special channel, called “19th CCP’s Congress”, to aggregate all relevant reports from major official news organizations and news websites (Xinhuanet, 2017). Moreover, on its “Recommendation” channel, the “19th National Congress” special report was promoted as a sticky post during the Congress. On WeChat, the official account “Tencent News” pushed similar reports about the “19th CCP’s Congress” to all WeChat users (unless they have opted out) three times a day. Similarly, Weibo’s trending stories were full of news reports about the Congress from big central news giants. This example shows that while personalized news consumption has made the old model—spreading unified messages from the party-state through traditional news organizations—ineffective, the party-state can still use private platforms to spread its key messages. Given that major platforms now have a much bigger user base than any news organization, spreading messages via private platforms can be more effective than the traditional model.

Lastly, platforms also demonstrate their collaboration in public opinion guidance by cooperating with official news organizations, as the latter are the official mouthpieces of the party-state. For example, in March 2018, China’s three central broadcasters were merged into one single central broadcaster: *China Media Group* (CMG). In the same month, Shen Haixiong, the newly appointed Director-General of CMG (who is also a deputy minister of the CCP’s Central Publicity Department), held one-to-one meetings with the bosses of China’s biggest Internet companies: Tencent’s chairman and CEO Ma Huateng, Alibaba’s chairman Ma Yun and Baidu’s chairman and CEO Li Yanhong. They discussed developing partnerships to enhance the credibility and influence of CMG in guiding public opinion, and all the three bosses promised that they would use their advantages in technologies and platform services to do so (Bao, 2018). Another example is the strategic partnership between *People’s Daily* and Baidu regarding the operation of peoplehao platform, the open-publishing service launched in 2018 by the official

⁸¹The CCP’s National Congress is held every five years and is generally considered China’s most important domestic political event.

newspaper. Baidu not only provides technological support for peoplehao platform, the content published on this platform is also disseminated on Baidu's baijiaohao platform (People's Daily Online, 2018b).

Collaboration in content and user governance

Section 7.2 has discussed the Chinese party-state's new Internet governance approach: governance *through* platforms. Obviously, this approach involves the cooperation of platforms, which have to delete certain content and suspend or close relevant accounts requested by the state and disclose relevant personal information to the state (as discussed in chapter 7). However, in China, platforms are expected to do more: they are required to take the "main responsibilities" in governing their sites, rather than just wait for the instructions from the state and then cooperate in enforcing them. In other words, platforms have to take initiatives to fulfill their governance responsibilities; and when they are doing so, they are actually collaborating (more than just passively cooperating) with the party-state in governing their sites.

Chinese platforms collaborate with the state in relation to online governance in various ways, such as taking active measures in content deletion and user account governance (suspension or closure), hiring more human moderators, and taking the initiative to develop mechanisms to combat rumours. First, although platforms often enforce content governance (such as deleting relevant content and closing relevant accounts) at the request of government regulators (see section 7.1.2), they also actively delete "harmful" content (meaning "harmful" to the party-state's public opinion control) and suspend or close relevant user accounts to show their willingness to collaborate with the state regarding Internet governance. One example is the closure of the top self-media account *Mimeng* and its several subordinate accounts by almost all Chinese platforms in February 2019. After closing the account, Toutiao issued a public notice (Toutiao, 2019):

Based on the reports of users and our own monitoring, we have discovered that some official accounts have published content that is

false [...]. Toutiaohao platform fulfills its main responsibilities [in governance] and has closed a number of accounts including *Mimeng* [...]. We encourage content creators to spread positive energy actively, advocate socialist core values, and we will further strengthen our management of content and accounts to build a healthier, sound, constructive, and diverse Internet ecology [my translation].

In the above excerpt, Toutiao made it clear that it closed the top self-media account, not because the government regulator had required it to do so (though it was impossible to know whether the regulator had given such hint or order in private), but because it was fulfilling its “main responsibilities” in Internet governance. Moreover, the platform further required content creators to spread “positive energy” and advocate “socialist core values” and promised to build a “healthier” Internet environment, all of which followed the official rhetoric of the party-state regarding online content governance. Obviously, Toutiao’s response has gone beyond the public-private cooperation model, but has fallen into the state-platform collaboration model in terms of Internet governance.

Secondly, in recent years, many Chinese platforms have been expanding their teams of human moderators to strengthen their content governance, partly to satisfy the party-state. As mentioned in section 7.2.1, in January 2018, Toutiao announced that the company would hire 2, 000 more content moderators. In the job description of the recruiting advertisement, the company claimed that “Communist Party members” were preferred for the advertised positions (The Paper, 2018b). Li Tong, vice editor-in-chief of Toutiao, explained the reason for preferring CCP members as content moderators (*ibid.*):

15% of our content moderators are CCP members [...]. They have firmer political direction and political stance; they are more sensitive to the “high-voltage power lines” and “red lines”; and they have

better judgment about issues concerning political principles [my translation].

Clearly, by explicitly stating their preference for hiring CCP members, Toutiao demonstrated its willingness in carrying out content governance within the “red lines” set by the party-state. Another more likely motivation behind such a surprising recruiting advertisement,⁸² as suggested by my interviewee IE-11, senior executive of a major news platform, may be that Toutiao was trying to demonstrate its obedience to the state and alleviating the pressure from the government regulators.

Thirdly, Chinese major platforms have taken initiatives and collaborated closely with the state departments and public institutions in combating online rumours. For example, in June 2017, WeChat formerly launched its Rumour Filter service, through which users can search relevant rumours through keywords and receive notifications if the content they viewed has been labeled as rumours. The service also displays the third-party institutions that have been verified by WeChat as having the qualifications to label and refute rumours. As of January 2019, there were 774 institutions being listed as third-party rumour-refuting partners on WeChat Rumour Filter service. Among them, most were government departments, medical institutions, news organizations, and public educational institutions (Xiao and Cao, 2019). The authority of defining/labeling and refuting rumours is, without doubt, a profound power, although such power is often followed by corresponding responsibilities, which may be why Mark Zuckerberg once noted, he did not want Facebook to become the “arbitrator of the truth” (Ingram, 2016). In the case of WeChat Rumour Filter, the verified rumour-refuting institutions are situated in a privileged position in deciding on what is false and what is true, which may have profound implications for guiding and controlling online public opinion.

⁸²It is rare for Chinese private companies to state publicly that they prefer to hire more CCP members.

Weibo and Toutiao have also established their own rumour-refuting systems. Of them, Weibo has developed a rumour-refuting platform, which receives the complaints and reports from users and invites major news-media accounts and state accounts on Weibo to label rumours and publish corresponding rumour-refuting content. That is to say, news media accounts and state accounts are not only sources for news, but also an important part of the Weibo rumour-identifying-and-refuting system. Until November 2018, a total of 1638 news media accounts and 1322 state accounts had been granted the authority of labeling and refuting rumours by the platform (Weibo, 2018). Similarly to WeChat and Weibo, Toutiao grants some third-party institutions (such as government departments, news organizations, and other public institutions like medical institutions) and individual professionals (such as media and medical professionals) the privilege of labeling rumours (Beijing News, 2017). For those who have viewed content that is labeled as rumour later, Toutiao's algorithms can recommend relevant rumour-refuting articles to them, a mechanism similar to the notification service of WeChat Rumour Filter system.

Compared to Western platforms like Facebook, which has recruited a limited number of third-party institutions (usually news organizations and non-partisan independent organizations) to flag false stories (Lyons, 2018)⁸³, the rumour-refuting systems of Chinese platforms involve a great number of government departments, state-controlled news organizations and other public institutions. Here, Chinese platforms take the initiative to develop their rumour-refuting services, and state departments and public institutions play the role of judging whether certain content is rumour—an obvious example of state-platform collaboration in Internet governance. In fact, in November 2018, Weibo's rumour-refuting system was renamed as the *Weibo Collaborative Governance Platform for Rumour-refuting* (微博辟谣共治平台).

8.1.2 Collaboration beyond news and public opinion

⁸³In the case of Facebook, as of June 2018, it had 25 third-party fact-checking partners in 14 countries, mainly news organizations and non-partisan organizations. See: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/06/hard-questions-fact-checking/>.

This sub-section examines the state-platform collaboration in economic, social and technological areas. During the collaboration process, just as the quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows, Chinese private platforms are, in a way, acting like “quasi-state-owned” companies. As this sub-section will show, such collaboration works for the interests of both sides. On the one side, it helps to consolidate the market dominance of some major private platforms in China. On the other side, private platforms serve as an informatization (see the definition of “informatization” in section 2.2.3) tool for the party-state’s “cyber power” (网络强国) strategy, which provides an explanation for the state’s tolerance of the challenges brought by private platforms regarding public opinion control.

Platforms as an informatization tool

The Chinese party-state has emphasized that “cyber security” and “informatization” are “two wings of a bird and two wheels of an engine” (Xinhua, 2014). Their crucial importance was outlined by President Xi Jinping in 2014 as “Without cyber security, there is no national security; without informatization, there is no modernization” (Bandurski, 2017). From President Xi’s words, both cyber security and informatization are of strategic importance to the party-state’s legitimacy of staying in power. The CCP’s juxtaposition of “informatization” and “cyber security”, which includes online content security (or online public opinion control) in China’s context (NPC Standing Committee, 2016, article 47), suggests that it would not sacrifice informatization for more secure control of the Internet, but would seek a balance between them. This may partly explain why the party-state tolerated the challenges brought by platforms in relation to public opinion control in the first place.

The term “modernization”, defined by Inglehart (1997) as “above all, a process that increases the economic and political capabilities of a society” (p.5), has been used by the party-state as an encompassing goal for China’s development in various areas such as economy, politics, culture and society. As “the engine” for China’s modernization, informatization is part of the CCP’s national strategy, with the goal of building China into a “cyber power”

(CCTV, 2014). Chinese digital media platforms, especially WeChat, have proven their role as a crucial informatization tool, contributing to the country's modernization in economy, society and technology.

Platforms' contribution to China's economy is particularly embodied in the so-called "Internet Plus" action plan. This action plan was first presented by Premier Li Keqiang in March 2015, aiming to integrate the Internet with traditional industries and fuel China's economic growth.⁸⁴ WeChat is a typical platform that has facilitated this action plan, as it provides the needed *connections* between the Internet and traditional industry. Among WeChat's many services, its official accounts and mini programs are at the core of facilitating such connections (see section 2.1.2 about these two services). WeChat official accounts provide a way for individuals and various types of organizations and companies to publish content, provide services, and engage with the public. WeChat mini programs serve as the bridges between online and offline services.⁸⁵

Previous statistics have demonstrated the prominent contribution of WeChat to China's economy. According to the "WeChat Economic and Social Impact Research Report 2017" (CAICT, 2018), in the year of 2017, WeChat-related information consumption reached RMB 209.7 billion (accounting for 4.7% of China's total information consumption) and traditional consumption (such as travel, food, shopping, tourism, etc.) reached RMB 333.9 billion (a 22.2% increase over the former year). Moreover, WeChat helped to create 20.3 million jobs (e.g., many individuals start their businesses from running official accounts on WeChat) in that year, more than twice the 2014 figure. Furthermore, the penetration of WeChat payment for users under 18 and over 60 reached 97.3% and 46.7%, respectively. These impressive figures show the economic power of WeChat.

⁸⁴It is reported that the "Internet Plus" action plan originated from a proposal put forwarded by Tencent's chairman Ma Huateng, as a representative of the National People's Congress (NPC), during the annual NPC meeting in March 2015. http://www.legaldaily.com.cn/index/content/2018-11/27/content_7703510.htm

⁸⁵According to Tencent, until March 2018, users of WeChat mini programs surpassed 400 million.

Platforms have also demonstrated their role in the society. For instance, WeChat City Service has become China's most comprehensive and unified platform for online public services. This city service platform (itself has become a platform within WeChat) was launched by WeChat in 2015, and city governments and public institutions (e.g., hospitals) can apply to join the unified public-service platform and provide services to the public. As of March 2018, WeChat City Service has covered 362 Chinese cities, providing more than 9, 000 public services spanning many areas (such as public transportation, weather, utility bills, healthcare, education, and social security) (Tencent, n.d.). As of May 2018, over 500 million people have used this service (CNNIC, 2018). One example is the healthcare sector, where the waiting time has been shortened by 43.6 minutes on average for institutions that have participated in this City Service platform (Ibid.).

In addition to public services, WeChat's social penetration extends into many other areas. A prominent example is the WeChat electronic ID program. Since 2018, WeChat users can apply for an electronic ID through WeChat, which can be used to register in hotels and apply for many government services without the need of bringing their physical ID cards (this service is now available in some provinces like Guangdong). The program was co-developed by the Ministry of Public Security of China and WeChat. The WeChat electronic ID's "high-security" mechanism is connected to a person's face, fingerprints and the physical ID card chip, which makes it difficult to counterfeit (Wu, 2018). This program has demonstrated the profound collaboration between the state and private platforms. It also shows that WeChat has been so deeply embedded within China's society that it is even performing some of the functions of the government.

Private platforms and their parent companies have also become the driving force of China's technological innovations. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a typical area. The Chinese party-state views AI development as a national strategy, and has appointed four private Internet companies (namely, Tencent, Alibaba, iFlyTek and Baidu) to an "AI national team" and designated each of them to focus on one specific field: Tencent on medical diagnosis; Baidu on

autonomous driving; Alibaba on smart city; and iFlyTek on voice intelligence (Wei, 2018). So far, these companies have achieved initial success in their designated areas and are extending to other AI areas. For example, Tencent is now deepening its AI research on transportation solutions, security and protection, as well as voice recognition (Ibid.). China's AI strategy shows that private Internet companies are allowed, or even "invited", to dominate a strategic technology area. Similar domination by private Internet companies has been seen in cloud computing, another strategic technology area. According to market data provider IDC, in 2017, Alibaba is China's cloud computing market leader with 45% of the total share, followed by Tencent with around 10% of the market share (Qu et al., 2018). The examples of AI and cloud computing have not only shown the technology innovation capacity of Chinese private Internet companies, but also the state-platform collaboration in strategic technological areas.

"Proud parent" and "adopted son"

Why has the Chinese party-state been incorporating private platforms (and Internet companies) within its informatization strategy in such a profound way? Part of the reasons can be inferred from the following quotation from President Xi Jinping in 2016 (Gov.cn, 2016):

Currently, among the top ten Internet companies in the world, China has four companies on the list [...] Private [Internet] companies have become bigger, stronger, and global. Thus, they have made bigger contribution to the country and its people. This is something the state is proud of [my translation].

The above quotation shows that, while China's major Internet giants are all privately owned, they are, first and foremost, *Chinese* companies in the eyes of the party-state. Therefore, their success is something that the party-state can take credit for and be proud of. Referring back to the metaphors used by my interviewees: state-controlled news organizations as the party-state's "own son" and private platforms as its "adopted son" (see section 7.1.2), the party-state is like a "proud parent" to their "adopted son".

The party-state's "paternalistic" attitude (see more discussion in section 7.1.2) towards private Internet companies is also reflected in the words of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. At a central government executive meeting in June 2017, Premier Li commented that the success of WeChat might not be possible if the government had not adopted a "tolerant and cautious" (包容审慎) attitude towards them (Gov.cn, 2017). In other words, the party-state has played the role of a "tolerant" parent, who has put up with the wrongdoings of the "mischievous kids": challenges brought by private platforms regarding public opinion control.

Given that Chinese private platforms and Internet companies have become the informatization tool of the party-state, the state's "tolerant" attitude is not hard to understand. As my interviewee IE-14, senior editor of a central news organization, comments, for the party-state, China's Internet giants like Tencent and Alibaba are like a "business card" of China, demonstrating the innovation capability of the country. That is why, when Chinese President Xi paid a state visit to the United States in 2015, bosses of China's major Internet companies, including Ma Yun (founder of Alibaba) and Ma Huateng (founder and CEO of Tencent), were among his entourage (CNTV, 2015). In October 2018, China unveiled a list of 100 outstanding private entrepreneurs at the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up, and on the list were Ma Huateng, Ma Yun, Zhang Yiming (founder and CEO of Bytedance), and Ren Zhengfei (founder and chairman of Huawei) (Zhu, 2018).

It is clear that Chinese private platforms and Internet companies have become the ideal tools for the party-state to fulfill its goal of building the country into a "cyber power". In the last two decades, China has witnessed a booming Internet Industry, dominated by the private sector. While most Chinese Internet companies started by replicating Western innovations in the late 1990s and the 2000s, they now have "come into their own" (The Economist, 2018). Chinese Internet giants, especially Tencent and Alibaba, have not only established their dominance in China's domestic market, but also started to go abroad (e.g., WeChat has entered some Asian markets, and Alibaba is

growing in overseas e-commerce, mobile payment and cloud computing markets). In some strategic areas such as AI, China is becoming a world leader. In his book, titled *AI Superpowers*, Dr. Li Kaifu (2018), one of the world's leading experts on AI and a former senior executive of American Silicon Internet giants, forecasts that China and the United States will be the world's two AI superpowers.

An observation arising from the above “proud parent vs. adopted son” account is that the “adopted son” seems to be quite powerful in economic, social and technological areas, contrasting their “weak” role in terms of public opinion control (as discussed in chapter 7). As a commentary, titled “The upstarts that challenge the power in Beijing”, from *Financial Times* observes (Pilling, 2015):

There is an overarching force in China with tentacles reaching deep into almost everybody's life. That force is not the Communist party [...]. The more disruptive force [...] these days is epitomized by the three large internet groups: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent [...]. One must assume that [...] the authorities could cripple even the biggest private company. Yet [...] even the mighty Communist party might have cause to pause.

However, the above observation is only superficial. This is because while Western platforms are often seen as sitting “between traditional national states and ordinary individuals” (Balkin, 2017:1151), Chinese domestic platforms are operating under the overarching power of the party-state. Although Chinese Internet giants like Tencent and Alibaba have market dominance in many areas, challenging the power in Beijing, especially in politics and public opinion areas, is almost impossible and unthinkable for them. As discussed earlier, the Chinese government regulators can have the licenses of platforms revoked or even their Internet connections cut-off under extreme circumstances, at least in theory (see section 2.2). That is to say, China's state-platform collaboration is happening within a bigger structure dominated by the Chinese party-state.

8.2 State-platform “collaborative governance”

Based on the discussion of earlier chapters and the above-discussed collaboration between the Chinese state and private platforms, this section argues for a “collaborative governance” model regarding China’s public opinion control in the platform era. The model has a number of main features: (1) it involves both control and collaboration; (2) Internet governance is mainly enforced *through* platforms; (3) platform surveillance is an important instrument for public opinion control. In addition to discussing these features, this section will further examine the effectiveness of this model regarding public opinion control in principle.

Figure 8.3: China’s pre-platform model for public opinion control

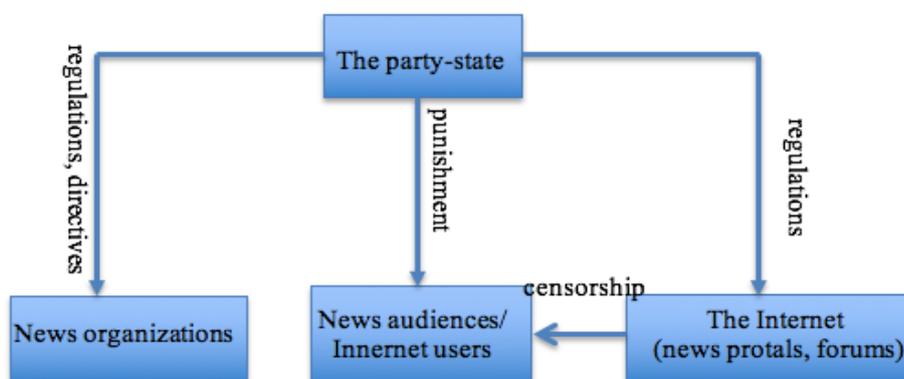
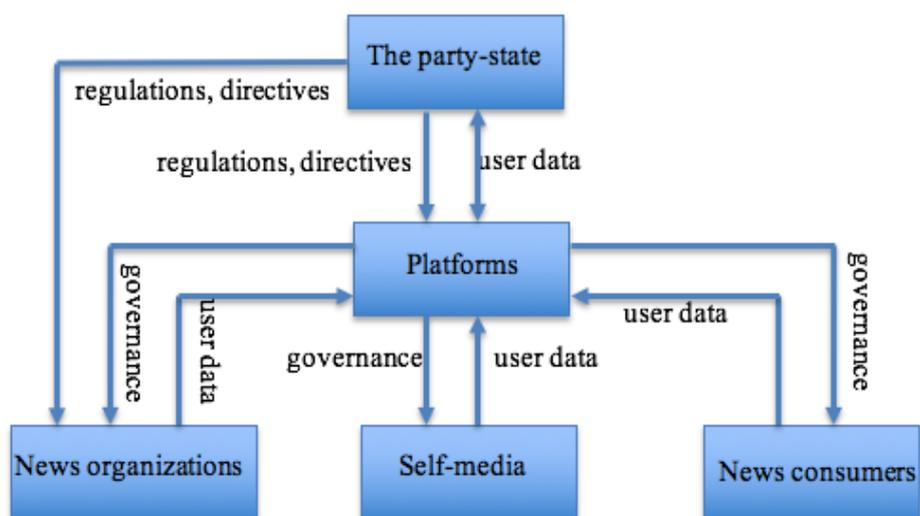


Figure 8.4: China’s “collaborative governance” model for public opinion control



8.2.1 A “collaborative governance” model

Figure 8.3 and Figure 8.4 are my models in relation to China’s public opinion control in the pre-platform era and platform era respectively. In pre-platform era, the party-state itself is the main governance enforcer: it enforces regulations over both news organizations and private websites and implements punishment over individual users. In contrast, in the platform era, while still maintaining direct control over news organizations, the party-state mainly targets platforms, which enforce governance over news organizations, self-media operators, and news consumers and collect user data from them. In discussing the features of China’s platform-era model, I will make necessary comparison with the pre-platform model and comparison between Chinese and Western contexts.

Collaboration and control coexist

In my “collaborative governance” model, private platforms are not merely “the regulated” or “the controlled” that are required to censor their sites; they are also playing an active role in public opinion control on behalf of the Chinese state. This is an essential feature of my “collaborative governance” model. It is necessary to point out that state-platform collaboration not only works for the state, as platforms take initiatives to guide or control public opinion (see section 8.1.1), it also benefits platforms. For private platforms, collaborating with the state regarding public opinion control is not only crucial for their long-term commercial success (as discussed in section 8.1), but also important in consolidating their market dominance in China. Take WeChat as an example. As discussed in section 8.1.2, through collaborating with the state in areas like electronic identity card and Artificial Intelligence, WeChat has extended its tentacles deeper into China’s society as well as expanded its user data reservoir, a crucial resource in today’s digital world.

While incorporating private platforms into its system of public opinion control, the party-state has maintained a strict control over private platforms (as discussed in section 7.1). This collaboration-and-control feature has been captured and illustrated in my “collaborative governance” model (see Figure 8.4). Under the model, the Chinese party-state, sitting at the top, exerts control

over news organizations and private platforms through constantly evolving regulations, while at the same time encourages collaboration from them through internal meetings and directives. That is to say, while collaboration is a main element in this model, it coexists with state control. In other words, Chinese platforms collaborate with the party-state under the shadow of state control.

This dual approach in China's public opinion control has also been witnessed in pre-platform era (see section 2.2.4). The main difference between them is that, in the pre-platform era, the party-state maintained this control-and-collaboration relation mainly with news organizations, rather than private Internet companies (as illustrated in Figure 8.3). Of course, even in the pre-platform era, Chinese Internet companies were required to *cooperate* with the party-state regarding Internet governance (e.g., MacKinnon, 2011; Jiang, 2012). However, as private platforms are now sitting at the centre of China's news ecology, the party-state has to rely more on the *collaboration* (not only *cooperation*) from them regarding public opinion control.

In comparison, there exists a certain level of control and cooperation between states and platforms in Western contexts. On the one hand, national governments constantly put pressure on platforms to police their sites in certain ways (Balkin, 2017). For example, in 2019, Germany fined Facebook two million euros for violating its hate speech law which requires digital platforms to tackle hate speech within 24 hours (Delcker, 2019). On the other hand, to obtain a stable and predictable environment for doing businesses, Western platforms often seek to develop a relationship of "peaceful coexistence and cooperation" with governments (Balkin, 2017:1180), leading to "cooperative and mutually supportive relations between the power centres of both Internet business and governance" (Hintz, 2016:6). That is to say, compared to the Western contexts, where the state puts pressure on platforms to force them to cooperate (Balkin, 2017), state-platform relations regarding public opinion control in China involve more direct and heavier control from the state, and platforms not only cooperate with the Chinese state, but also take initiatives to collaborate with the state.

Collaborative governance through platforms

While Chinese news organizations are still an important part of the party-state's public opinion control system, given that they still have the privilege of gathering and producing news in key areas in China (see section 6.2.2), platforms are increasingly sitting at the center of this system. Unlike news organizations, which are assumed to guide or shape public opinion through their content production, platforms are collaborating with the state in both public opinion guidance and online governance (as discussed in section 8.1.1). The latter role of platforms is particularly important in the platform era. As illustrated in Figure 8.4, in addition to being regulated by and receiving directives from the state, platforms exercise governance over various actors: self-media, news consumers and news organizations (although the governance power of platforms over news organizations is limited, see section 7.2.1). Given that the Chinese state now mainly relies on platforms for enforcing governance, this "state-platform collaborative governance" model can also be understood as collaborative governance *through* platforms.

This model is similar to Balkin's (2017) theory of "new school speech regulation" (see section 3.3.2 for more discussion): nation states now target the owners of private infrastructure (rather than target speakers directly) in order to "coerce or coopt them into regulating speech on the nation state's behalf" (p.1153). Here, one main difference between these two governance models is that, in China's context, the aim of state-platform "collaborative governance" is to control public opinion, while Balkin's "new school speech regulation" is discussed in relation to freedom of speech. Another difference lies in the relations between the state and platforms: Chinese platforms are deeply embedded within the party-state's public opinion control system (see section 6.2.2 and section 8.1.1), while Western platforms generally have more leeway to decide on whether and how to cooperate with governments regarding online content governance, as evidenced in Google's response to the content removal requests from the U.S. government (in the second half of 2017, 44% content removal requests were rejected, see section 7.2.3).

From the perspective of the Chinese party-state, collaborative governance *through* platforms has at least two obvious advantages. First, as mentioned in section 7.2, it is much more efficient to target platforms and require them to police their sites on behalf of the party-state, given that policing major platforms is a “complex and laborious undertaking” (Gillespie, 2018b:198). Second, private platforms have the capability to censor, surveil and enforce sanctions over their sites, which nation states, including the Chinese party-state, often do not have (e.g., Balkin, 2017; Gillespie, 2017a; Xie and Xiu, 2017). In fact, Chinese government regulators explicitly require information service providers to have the “corresponding technological capabilities” to govern their sites in an instant manner (e.g., CAC, 2017d; CAC, 2019, article 6). As Balkin (2017) observes, it is assumed that even though platforms do not currently have the ability to govern, they will develop it over time, due to natural evolution of their businesses or to government pressure (p.1182).

Platform surveillance: a crucial governance instrument

As discussed in section 7.2.3, surveillance is the primary business of platforms and a crucial instrument of platform governance. Although surveillance has long been a part of China’s Internet governance, carried out by the state or private Internet companies (e.g., Tsui, 2003; Wang and Hong, 2010), surveillance conducted by today’s platforms is on an unprecedented level. This is because news content, news producers, and news consumers are converging toward major platforms (see section 5.1), giving them the privilege of accumulating massive user data. Moreover, as discussed in section 7.2.3, Chinese platforms “legally” gather extensive user data for the purpose of public opinion control, as they are required by the state to adopt the real-name-registration-and-verification policy and conduct real-time patrolling of their sites. This feature has been illustrated in Figure 8.4: platforms collect user data from all other actors: news consumers, self-media, news organizations, and the party-state (namely, state accounts on platforms). It is worth noting that the flow of user data is two-way between platforms and the party-state, illustrating that Chinese platforms disclose user data to the party-state under certain circumstances (as discussed in section 7.2.3).

Surveillance becomes an important part of China's Internet governance, not only because platforms are collecting unprecedented level of user data, but also because a huge number of platform users (e.g., WeChat has over 1 billion users) are carrying out surveillance for platforms in identifying and reporting "harmful" content. As discussed in section 3.2, the so-called "peer-to-peer" form of surveillance (Manokha, 2018a: 221) is a crucial part of platform surveillance. In other words, in the platform era, both platforms and platform users, knowingly or unknowingly, are playing a surveillance role for the benefit of the Chinese party-state's public opinion control.

8.2.2 A more effective governance model

Compared to the pre-platform model, this "collaborative governance" model is expected to be more effective in relation to public opinion control for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the converging news environment seen in China (see section 5.1), it is easier for the party-state to control a limited number of major platforms than to target individuals and numerous websites containing news content. In contrast, in the pre-platform era, China's domestic Internet censorship is deeply fragmented and decentralized, with variation from company to company (Bamman et al., 2012; MacKinnon, 2009). Partly due to such a fragmented nature, China's pre-platform censorship system was "porous" and did not always filter "the worst of blacklisted keywords" (Bamman et al., 2012: section 2).

This is why China's platform-centered news ecosystem can be beneficial for the party-state to control public opinion. As my interviewee IE-13 observes:

Now, the government only needs to watch a number of platforms, a number of Internet companies, because a billion people, including elites and intellectuals, are all on platforms [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist from *Southern Weekend*, 2018

Such a situation can be linked to the impact of media conglomeration (part of China's market-oriented media commercialization)⁸⁶ on China's media control. This process was driven by the party-state itself, which was faced by a fragmented and decentralized media structure caused by the earlier stage of media commercialization since the late 1970s (Zhao, 2000; Hadland, 2015). Since media conglomeration is structured in a way that strengthens the leadership of the state, the Chinese party-state has been able to exert tighter political control over the traditional media (Zhao, 2000). As Hadland (2015) observes, "It is far easier to direct 30 or 40 conglomerates than control hundreds of thousands of individual newspapers" (p.120). Likewise, it is far easier to control a number of major platforms than to target numerous websites and individual users.

Secondly, major platforms have more resources and better capabilities in policing their sites than the party-state and earlier generation of online news portals and social media sites. One such resource is the entire population of platform users, who are now a crucial part of the governance system of platforms and become what Gillespie (2018a) calls "amateur editors or police" for platforms (p.20). That is why even if a self-media operator can circumvent the keyword filtering of Chinese platforms and get politically sensitive articles published, such articles often can only exist very briefly (see section 7.2), given that platform users can report such content to platforms through one or a few clicks. Moreover, popular platforms, usually owned by China's major Internet companies such as Tencent, Alibaba and Bytedance, generally have much more advanced technologies in exercising content governance than government regulators (Xie and Xiu, 2017). This is partly because, in the platform era, a large part of content governance is conducted by algorithms, which require a high level of capability in artificial intelligence. As discussed in section 8.1.2, a few private Internet companies such as Tencent and Alibaba are dominating China's artificial intelligence market.

⁸⁶"Media conglomeration" in China refers to the move of the party-state to put the more market-oriented news organizations under the umbrella of party media at the same administrative level since the mid-1990s (e.g., Zhao, 2000).

Thirdly, as discussed in section 7.1.1, platform surveillance entails a “24/7 model” of constant monitoring of the online world, which is expected to encourage more pervasive self-censorship among platforms users (both news producers and news consumers). Similar observations have been made in Western contexts (e.g., Fuchs, 2008; Manokha, 2018a). As discussed in section 2.2.4, self-censorship is an important part of China’s censorship system, which has been embedded in online space, as well as newsrooms (e.g., Wang and Hong, 2010; Handland, 2015; Tai, 2009). Prior research on China’s Internet censorship on Weibo suggests that the real-name registration policy, adopted by all Chinese platforms, might have discouraged some micro-bloggers from writing about social and political subjects (Fu, Chan and Chau, 2013).

8.3 Platform-era public opinion control

As discussed above, in principle, the “collaborative governance” model is expected to be more effective for the party-state to control public opinion than before. In reality, as this section will show, this model has not made all concerns and challenges for the Chinese party-state disappear, and some new challenges have emerged from the platform-centered news ecosystem. However, as this section argues, the existence of these challenges does not mean platforms constitute a threat or risk to the party-state; on the contrary, platforms are more of a governance tool for the Chinese party-state to control online public opinion.

8.3.1 New challenges emerge

This sub-section examines some challenges to the party-state in relation to public opinion control under the “state-platform collaborative governance” model. Such challenges mainly include: (1) the inevitable existence of “harmful” content associated with platform governance (as discussed in section 7.2.2), especially politically sensitive content; (2) online discussion increasingly moving to more private space like WeChat; (3) the for-profit nature driving private platforms to keep testing the governance boundary set by the party-state.

The existence of “harmful” content

According to the annual Analysis Report on China’s Online Public Opinion (People’s Daily Online, 2013; 2014a; 2014c; 2015; 2017; 2018c), online “harmful” or “negative” content (meaning “harmful” or “negative” to the party-state) has been in continuous decline in recent years,⁸⁷ and thus the pressure for the party-state to respond to or tackle online public opinion has been relatively alleviated. However, the decline of online “harmful” or “negative” content in China may only be superficial, because it is not the result of natural evolution of online public opinion but created through the “collaborative governance” model. My interviewee IE-09 provides an account of the typical process of China’s online public opinion control practices during major incidents:

In the first one or two days after a major social incident happens, news organizations are often the main news source, as they have more resources [e.g., being allowed to conduct interviews]. After that, internal directives from regulators order them to stop their reporting. Meanwhile, commentaries from self-media start to come out [...], posing great challenges to the government. Then, [...] platforms start to delete relevant articles [...]. After that, it seems nothing has happened [my translation].

—IE-09, senior journalist of *China Central Television*, 2018

What my interviewee IE-09 observes is that, although there may exist different voices and opinions about major social incidents on China’s Internet, it often seems “nothing has happened” after a short period due to the state-platform collaboration in public opinion control. However, deleted articles, even if they existed just briefly on platforms, may have been uploaded to a more private online space (such as online forums) before they get deleted and they may have already generated impact on news consumers (see section 7.2.2). An example is the self-media operator Wang Wusi (王五四), an

⁸⁷Since 2007, analysts from *People’s Daily Online* have been monitoring China’s online public opinion and producing an annual analysis report. They choose 20 hot topics for a certain year according to the number of posts concerning a topic on China’s major social media platforms and forums. They analyze the features of China’s online public opinion mainly based on online discussion of these 20 hot topics.

influential freelancer, who has frequently criticized the lack of free speech and social justice in China. While his several WeChat official accounts have been closed, some of his articles published within these accounts are still accessible on some online forums and through overseas search engines such as Google.

In terms of “harmful” content, the main challenge for the party-state lies in the politically sensitive content produced by popular self-media opinion leaders. In a pre-platform era, news organizations and their journalists dominated the production of news in China. As Repnikova (2017) observes, while Chinese critical journalists have carried out “enduring battles within the system” by delving into sensitive areas such as corruption and societal inequality (p.4), their relationship with the state is “a fluid, state-dominated partnership”; and the two actors are “operating within a common political framework and aspiring towards a shared goal” (p.10). In other words, Chinese critical journalists operate within the “red lines” set by the party-state (see section 7.1.2). In contrast, although most of today’s self-media opinion leaders are discouraged from covering political topics, partly due to the “power of capital” (see section 6.1.2), there are still some popular self-media operators who sometimes go beyond the “red lines” and write commentaries critical of China’s status-quo in a veiled or straightforward way. Such examples include the afore-mentioned self-media accounts *Sun Liping*, *Society Observe*, *Sixgod* and *Wang Wusi*.

Online discussion moving to private space

Another main challenge for the party-state is that, due to the strengthening media and Internet control in the Xi Jinping era (see section 6.2 and section 7.1) and the “collaborative governance” model, China’s online discussion around censored articles and topics have been increasingly moving from more open space (such as blogs, online forums, and Weibo) to more private online space (especially WeChat). As discussed in section 2.1.2, compared to the Twitter-like Weibo, WeChat is a much more private and closed social media platform. Within China, Weibo is often likened to online “public square” and WeChat is likened to online “tea houses” (e.g., Li, 2017a; People’s Daily

Online, 2017). While it is tempting to connect WeChat “tea houses” to Western “coffee houses” or “salons” in the 18th century that Habermas (1991) discussed in his public sphere theory (cited in Calhoun, 1992), WeChat “tea houses” are obviously different, as they are traceable in a digital era.

It is worth noting that this phenomenon—online discussion moving to more private space—has also been witnessed in some other media contexts. The annual *Digital News Report*, compiled by the RISJ, showed that in a number of media markets including the US, UK and France, the use of Facebook for news in 2018 had started to fall after years of continuous growth (Newman et al., 2018: 9). In contrast, the use of more private messaging apps like WhatsApp for news has seen a rapid increase in some markets. In some authoritarian markets like Turkey, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, the survey data, commissioned by RISJ, suggested “a strong correlation between use of networks like WhatsApp and self-expressed concern about the safety of posting political messages” (Ibid., p.13). This phenomenon may help to partly explain why China’s online discussion has been moving from public-square-style Weibo to tea-house-style WeChat.

Online discussion within more private space may pose some challenges to the party-state. As Stockmann and Luo (2017) conclude, while Weibo, as a social media aiming to spread information, still has the “greatest potential” in China to facilitate the rise of online public opinion on political topics, WeChat has the potential for “incubating issues and forming opinions that are essential for public opinion to rise and for mobilizing collective action” (p.198). This situation is worrying for the party-state for at least two reasons. First, as discussed in section 7.2, while platforms are required by the party-state to monitor user content and behaviours, monitoring private space like WeChat chats and group chats is still controversial in China. Secondly, within private space, public opinion is more “stratified”, as discussion about public issues is often dispersed into numerous chats between two friends or group chats that are formed based on the social relations or common interests of group members (People’s Daily Online, 2015). That is to say, online discussion

moving to more private space creates a more complex and challenging environment for the party-state to exert control.

The for-profit nature of private platforms

The third main challenge to the party-state relates to the for-profit nature of private platforms. To achieve commercial success, Chinese platforms have to make the judgements about what content is allowed or not allowed on their sites and strike a slippery balance between satisfying the party-state and attracting more users and clicks. This situation is, to some extent, similar to what media commercialization has brought to marketized news organizations, which have to please both the CCP and the public and have been testing the reporting boundary and playing the “cat and mouse” game with the party-state (e.g., Gang and Bandurski, 2011:54). However, different from marketized news organizations, which are primarily the CCP’s mouthpieces and still owned/controlled by the party-state, major platforms are privately owned, and their primary goal is to make money.

Due to their for-profit feature, private platforms tend to test the content governance boundaries set by the party-state, especially in non-political areas, in order to appeal to a wide range of users. This has partly led to the prevalence of vulgar content and rumours (or disinformation) on Chinese platforms, a big challenge for the party-state in relation to content governance in the platform era (as discussed in section 7.1.2). As my interviewee IE-04 comments:

Platforms are for-profit businesses, and they don’t care about what people are reading online [...]. Click-bait content, vulgar content and rumours are everywhere [...]. China’s online news and information environment has been poisoned by them [my translation].

—IE-04, vice director of a major radio news channel, 2017

Obviously, this “poisoned” online news environment is not good for the reputation or image of the party-state, which has resorted to morality-based discourses to legitimize Internet control (e.g., Jiang, 2010, see section 7.1.2).

This is why Chinese major platforms are often summoned, scolded and punished by media and Internet regulators for hosting vulgar content and rumors.

Chinese private platforms have also been criticized for manipulating various rankings (such as top searches and top stories) and online discussion for commercial reasons. As discussed in section 6.2.1, Weibo rankings for top or trending searches and stories have become an important setter for the media and public agenda (e.g., Jiang, 2014; Yang, 2017). In January 2018, it was reported that some top searches of Weibo were actually paid advertisements without explicit labeling. According to the report from *Southern.com* (南方网), advertisers could pay Weibo to have certain keywords listed among its top-search rankings: 100, 000 Yuan per hour for a keyword to be placed among the top three searches, and 80, 000 Yuan and 40,000 Yuan per hour for top five and top ten searches respectively (Ding, 2018b). After this revelation, Weibo was widely criticized within China and reprimanded by government regulators for manipulating its “top search” rankings. This example shows that private platforms may manipulate online public opinion for commercial interests. That is why the PAINIS (CAC, 2017a) states that, INIS providers and their employees should not “intervene in the news and information display or searching outcomes” to pursue illegal interests (article 13.2).

8.3.2 Platforms: not a threat to the state

As discussed above, under the “collaborative governance” model, the party-state is still facing some challenges regarding public opinion control in the platform era. However, such challenges do not necessarily pose a threat to the party-state, given that the party-state has been responding to these challenges in a timely manner and, more importantly, Chinese platforms do not have the will or agenda to challenge the power or authority of the party-state.

Harmful content: not a big concern

The inevitable existence of “harmful” or “negative” content, especially politically sensitive content, on platforms hardly constitutes a threat to the party-state. As my interviewee IE-13 observes:

China has over 1.3 billion people. It is impossible to have only one voice [...]. For individuals, if they only express their opinions and don't go into action, that's nothing [to the party-state]. Only a collective or organized political force may confront the party-state, but there isn't such a force in China [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist from *Southern Weekend*, 2018

According to my interviewee IE-13, only organized actions and antagonist political forces, rather than individuals' challenging opinions expressed online, constitute a threat to the party-state. As discussed in section 7.1.1, the party-state's major concerns over platforms lie in their potential or capability in influencing public opinion or facilitating social mobilization. That is why innovative technologies or applications "with a news and public opinion nature or with social mobilization capability" must go through the security evaluation process in China (CAC, 2017e). Here, the "social mobilization capability" of platforms may lead to organized actions. Prior studies have reached similar conclusion. For example, King et al. (2013) concluded that China's Internet censorship tolerates certain level of criticism of the party-state, and mainly targets "collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization" (2013: 326).

In fact, allowing some space for individuals to express their resentment and opinions may even be beneficial for the party-state to understand public opinion and identify existing problems and potential threats. As the annual Analysis Report on China's Online Public Opinion suggests, in terms of public opinion control, it is necessary to keep an open platform like Weibo (People's Daily Online, 2014):

Weibo displays public opinion in a natural way [...] Keeping Weibo as a public platform [...] is conducive for the party-state to grasp the pulse of public opinion. An open public opinion platform can help to

identify local problems in a timely way, releasing the pressure of the society, clarify rumours and offset negative voices [my translation].

That is to say, while platforms like Weibo and WeChat may have brought some concerns to the party-state, they also serve as a tool for the party-state to understand and respond to public opinion. This echoes deLilse et al. (2016)'s observation: tolerating some online criticism, such as exposure of abuse of power, corruption and incidents, actually serves the party-state's interests, as such criticism provides a "steam valve" for public anger and brings potentially "stability-threatening" problems to the attention of the authorities who can then respond to them (p.2). Of course, there is a limit for the party-state's tolerance of criticism on platforms. That is, in the eyes of the party-state, the online world is still "manageable and controllable" (可管可控), a goal set by President Xi Jinping during a speech in 2013 (People's Daily, 2015). In other words, once the party-state finds certain new innovations and applications (say, the news-related functions of WeChat, and blockchain information services) are beyond their control, it is likely that some services will be banned altogether.

While tolerating the existence of certain criticism online, the party-state has been strengthening control through constantly upgrading the regulations concerning platforms and filling any possible loopholes. For example, in January 2019, the party-state promulgated a new regulation targeting blockchain information service providers, partly in response to the fact that some users have uploaded politically sensitive content onto blockchain. The regulation (CAC, 2019) states that, blockchain information service providers and users are not allowed to use blockchain information services to produce, copy, publish, and spread content that is banned by China's relevant laws and regulations (article 10).

Targeting Internet group creators

The party-state has taken a proactive approach in dealing with another challenge: online public discourses moving towards private space such as WeChat chats and group chats in China. The most prominent measure taken

by the state is the promulgation of the *Provisions for the Administration of Internet Groups Information Services* (PAIGIS) (CAC, 2017d). This regulation requires the creators and managers of Internet groups to take the responsibilities of group management (article 9). That is, not only platforms have the main responsibilities to govern group chats, individuals who create or manage groups on platforms also have to ensure their group members comply with relevant laws and regulations. Given that group chats are generally considered private space in China (see section 7.2.3), this article has drawn much discussion within WeChat group chats, making the promulgation of PAIGIS among China's 20 most discussed online public opinion events or incidents in 2017 (People's Daily Online, 2018c). Wang Sixin, a professor of China Communication University and an expert on Internet law, explained that the main responsibility for Internet group creators is to establish group rules and enforce them; to avoid being held liable for the speech or behaviours of their group members, group creators have to kick out members who post illegal or offending information or report such information to platforms or relevant government institutions (Huanqiu.com, 2017b). Obviously, this regulation will inevitably encourage group creators and managers to increase self-censorship, making Internet groups not that private anymore.

Moreover, the above regulation also requires platforms to set limitations on the maximum number of Internet group members (e.g., a WeChat group has a maximum of 500 members) (article 8.1). For those groups whose sizes have reached a certain threshold (no specific number is given), platforms are required to record relevant information about them (e.g., names, sizes, and content areas) (article 8). That is, platform monitoring on Internet groups should mainly target groups whose size has reached a certain threshold and whose discussion areas (such as politics-related) may be of concerns to the party-state. This is a typical application of the so-called "grading and classification" management system (see section 7.2), whose aim is to make platforms focus their governance resources on identifying and tackling potential threats for the party-state, rather than sporadic and individual criticism.

Furthermore, while private online space is harder and more controversial to monitor, platforms like WeChat do have, or may develop (when pressured by the party-state), the technological capacity in surveilling such private space. As Huanqiu.com, an official news website affiliated with *People's Daily*, claims (Huanqiu.com, 2017b):

Surveillance over Internet groups by platforms or government departments can only happen on certain conditions [...] Only when enough evidence emerges, for example, when an Internet group is reported [by users] or found to have involved in illegal activities, then the group will be dealt with [...] In our daily lives, we don't need to worry about being watched by "the third eye" [my translation].

While the above news report aimed to denounce the "rumour" that WeChat groups were under surveillance, it did confirm that when certain conditions were met, surveillance over WeChat group chats could happen. Given that Internet group users have no say in setting such conditions, they will always have to worry about living under the watch of "the third eye".

Platforms: not willing to challenge the state

Due to their for-profit nature, Chinese platforms may keep testing the boundary of online content governance, but they do not have the political will or agenda to challenge the party-state. As my interviewee IE-10 observes:

Challenging is an active behaviour. I don't believe Tencent or Alibaba would dare to challenge the authority of the government, even if they had the ability [...]. Political forces will always keep platforms within the "red lines" [my translation].

—IE-10, a former journalist of *Southern Metropolis Daily*, 2018

The above observation from my interviewee IE-10 has been echoed by another interviewee IE-13:

To ensure their commercial security, platforms have to ensure their political security. To confront the party-state is absolutely not an option. If the government requires you to delete certain content or close certain accounts, you will have to do so [my translation].

—IE-13, self-media operator and former journalist of *Southern Weekend*, 2018

It is easy to understand why it is in the interests of private platforms to operate within the “red lines” set by the party-state, given that cooperating and/or collaborating with the party-state is the only way for them to do business in China. In fact, it is not only Chinese platforms that have to face the situation: cooperating and/or collaborating with the party-state, or otherwise being punished and even excluded from China’s burgeoning market. An interesting observation from Griffiths (2019) is that Western Internet giants like Google and Facebook are bowing to pressure from the Chinese party-state and agreeing to compromise free speech in pursuit of the massive Chinese market. Earlier, partly because Google decided not to obey Chinese government’s censoring requirements, the company had to retreat from China mainland in 2010 (Helft and Barboza, 2010).

Chinese platforms that have failed to satisfy the state in terms of content governance often have to pay a price, as shown in the example of Bytedance, which has been repeatedly singled out and punished by China’s media and Internet regulators in recent years (see section 7.1.2). In April 2018, after a popular mobile joke application owned by Bytedance was ordered to be permanently closed by the media regulator, Zhang Yiming, founder and CEO of Bytedance, released a public apology letter, titled *Apologies and Self-reflection*. In the letter, he admitted that he “could not sleep for a whole night” and had been reflecting the problems of Toutiao, which included not paying enough attention to “public opinion guidance” and “socialist core values”. Here is an excerpt of the letter (Bytedance, 2018):

Our product went astray, hosting content that was not compatible with socialist core values [...]. We have overlooked the responsibilities of guiding our users to access information with positive energy. We haven't paid sufficient attention to undertaking our company's social responsibilities, to spreading positive energy, and to grasping the correct public opinion guidance [my translation].

The above words of Zhang Yiming were far away from his earlier controversial claims, such as Toutiao did not have values and was not supposed to educate or guide the public and vulgar content itself was not a problem (see section 2.1.2). As Jing and Dai (2018) observes, the wording and tone of Zhang's apology letter made it "a reminiscent of the 'self-criticism' of 'wrongdoers' during the era of Chinese leader Mao Zedong". The dramatic change of Zhang's words shows that, in order to survive and thrive in China, platforms have no choice but bow to the party-state.

Chapter conclusion

Building on earlier chapters and the examination of state-platform collaboration in public opinion control and wider areas, this last analytical chapter has argued for a "collaborative governance" model in relation to public opinion control in China and discussed its effectiveness both in principle and in reality. This model has several main features: state-platform relations involving both control and collaboration; Internet governance increasingly enforced through platforms; platform surveillance being a crucial governance instrument. In principle, this model is more effective in public opinion control than before, because: (1) the party-state now only needs to control a limited number of platforms; (2) platforms have better resources and capabilities in enforcing governance; (3) platform surveillance encourages more pervasive self-censorship among Chinese news producers and news consumers. In reality, under this "collaborative governance" model, there still exist some challenges regarding public opinion control, which mainly include: the inevitable existence of "harmful" content, online public discourses moving to more private platform space, and the for-profit nature of platforms. However, these challenges do not necessarily constitute a threat

to the party-state, given that the party-state has shown great adaptiveness in responding to such challenges and platforms do not have the will to challenge the authority of the state. Overall, under the “state-platform collaborative governance” model, platforms have become a governance tool for the party-state to strengthen public opinion control.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

Introduction

I started this project, in October 2015, with an assumption that the rise of digital media platforms in China may disrupt state power and pose a threat to the party-state in terms of online public opinion control. Such an assumption was based on my following untested observations: (1) unlike the state-controlled news organizations, major platforms are all owned by private Internet companies; (2) unlike traditional news media that follow news values like objectivity and public interest, platforms have their own values (such as maximizing clicks) and adopt algorithms as their main distribution mechanism; (3) platforms have transformed China's news processes (news production, distribution and consumption) and media power structure. However, as this project unfolded, empirical evidence, pointing to the opposite direction of my assumption, kept emerging. On the one hand, the party-state has adjusted its Internet regulatory framework to target platforms and has kept upgrading regulations concerning platforms, and thus has maintained a strict and effective control over platforms. On the other hand, platforms are collaborating with the party-state in areas including public opinion control and wider economic, social, and technological areas that increase the CCP's legitimacy. Based on such evidence, I have argued for a state-platform "collaborative governance" model in relation to China's public opinion control. Using this model, the Chinese party-state seems to maintain a more effective, rather than weakened, control of online public opinion. That is to say, private platforms are unlikely to be a threat to, but rather a governance and informatization tool for the party-state. This is an unexpected conclusion that emerged in the course of my research journey.

This concluding chapter provides a good opportunity to revisit my research purpose, to reassess my findings and examine their implications, to reflect on the limitations of this research, and to recommend some future research directions. This chapter divides into four sections. Section one will synthesize the main conclusions in relation to my central research question. Section two will discuss the relevance of my findings in light of previous literature and

the applicability of my “collaborative governance” model in wider national contexts. Section three will reflect on the limitations of this project, and section four will provide some recommendations for future research.

9.1 Main conclusions

This thesis has aimed to answer the following overall research question: *How do digital media platforms influence China’s news sphere and the party-state’s public opinion control?* To answer this question, I have drawn on empirical data from two sources: (1) a total of sixteen semi-structured qualitative interviews with senior executives or professionals from China’s major news organizations and platforms; and (2) document analysis of government regulations, official documents from platforms, third-party statistics and research reports, and outputs from news organizations and self-media. As for my analytical framework, I have identified three different but related structures—news flow structure, media power structure, and Internet governance structure—and examined what changes platforms have brought to these structures and the implications of these changes for the party-state’s public opinion control. Based on my empirical evidence, I conclude that while Chinese platforms have brought about a more open news ecosystem, they have not undermined the pre-platform media power structure, and instead they serve as a governance tool for the party-state regarding public opinion control.

9.1.1 A more open and autonomous news ecosystem

Platforms have transformed China’s news flow structure into a platform-centered news ecosystem, in which news production, distribution and consumption are increasingly mediated and influenced by platforms; and more interactions among various news actors are facilitated by platforms. Such a news ecosystem is more open and autonomous than before for a number of reasons. First, platforms provide open publishing space for a wide range of actors including individual news producers, and have greatly diversified news sources and perspectives available to news consumers. Another reason is that news content is “unbundled” on platforms and distributed on a single piece basis, creating a more equal environment for

individual news producers to gain popularity and attract audiences. For popular individual authors (or self-media operators), they can now make a living through content creation and get rid of the reliance on existing institutions (such as media organizations). Additionally, news consumers enjoy more autonomy in such an ecosystem, in that: (1) they can curate their own news feeds by subscribing to certain news sources and play the gatekeeping role for their friends' news feeds through sharing content; (2) they can engage with news organizations, self-media operators, and government departments directly on platforms; (3) they can even influence news production, to some degree, by making direct payments to news producers. Overall, a platform-centered news ecosystem is more open, autonomous, and interwoven. In contrast, in a pre-platform era, news production was mainly dominated by news organizations; news consumption was largely passive; and interactions among news actors were relatively limited.

Unsurprisingly, a platform-centered news ecosystem has brought challenges to the party-state's public opinion control. One main challenge lies in the greatly diversified news sources and perspectives on platforms, creating the so-called "problem of scale" for content governance in the platform era. This leads to the situation that "harmful" (meaning harmful to the party-state) content, whether it is politically harmful content, rumours, or vulgar content, inevitably exists on platforms and may have generated influence on news consumers before being deleted. Another challenge is that the algorithmic personalization of news consumption, together with the "problem of scale", has created a news environment that it is almost impossible for the party-state itself to effectively enforce content governance. In addition, China's online discussion is increasingly moving towards more private tea-house-style online space, such as WeChat's chats and group chats. This development makes it more challenging for the party-state to monitor China's online public opinion, which is now more stratified and fragmented.

9.1.2 A state-dominated media power structure

Undoubtedly, a more open news ecosystem has brought changes to China's media power structure. On the one hand, platforms have empowered all news producers, including self-media, news organizations and even government departments, in providing new channels and new ways to engage with news consumers. Such an empowering effect is particularly obvious in self-media: (1) they have become an important news source that can almost rival news organizations; (2) they have become China's de-facto independent news producers, and many of them now can shed their reliance on existing institutions (such as news organizations) in having their voices heard or making a living; and (3) many popular self-media operators are online opinion leaders and have demonstrated their agenda-setting and issue-framing capability during major social incidents (as evidenced in the "Changsheng vaccine" case, see section 6.1.2)

On the other hand, platforms have, at the same time, disempowered the news producers for different reasons. For news organizations, their traditional advertisement-based business model has been further challenged by platforms. Moreover, their established journalistic values (such as objectivity and accuracy) conflict with and have been influenced by the designs and distribution mechanisms of platforms, leading to the decline of serious and good quality news in China. These factors have contributed to the exodus of Chinese media professionals in recent years. As for popular self-media, the "power of capital" (in the form of venture capitalists' investment, advertising revenue, and readers' payments) has discouraged them from covering politically sensitive topics, as they now have more financial motivation to ensure the "political safety" of their content and the very survival of their accounts. While such empowering and disempowering effects are witnessed at the same time, it must be pointed out that, for news organizations, the disempowering effect of platforms is the main aspect; for self-media, the empowering effect is the main one.

The above-discussed media power shift is certainly a challenge to the party-state, which traditionally relies on state-controlled news organizations to guide public opinion. However, the transforming news ecosystem has not

changed the fundamental nature of China's media power structure, which is still hierarchical and dominated by the party-state. This is because the party-state, as China's media and Internet regulator and also the news media and information infrastructure owner or controller, still holds the overarching power in China's news and public opinion sphere. No matter how many subscribers a self-media account has, or how many users a platform has, the party-state can simply order them to be suspended or closed, and there is no available mechanism to challenge such decisions. In other words, in the platform era, while platforms themselves and self-media do have more media power, they are still "weak" actors when compared to the party-state.

Within China's state-dominated media power structure, relations between the main news actors are more variable and complex than it may appear. For instance, in discussing the gatekeeping power of platforms, all types of news producers (news organizations, self-media, and state accounts) are the "gated" actors with similar interests: to increase the visibility of their content on platforms. When it comes to the challenges in relation to public opinion control, state-controlled news organizations, as the mouthpieces of the CCP, are a tool of the party-state, while both private platforms and self-media are sources of concerns for the party-state. But when turning to Internet governance (mainly over self-media and news consumers), private platforms then become participants in the governance system and align with the party-state.

9.1.3 A more effective public opinion control model

Although platforms have transformed China's news flow structure and brought changes to China's media power structure, they have become an effective governance tool for, rather than a disruptive force to, the party-state's public opinion control. This is mainly due to two reasons: First, China's platform-centered news ecosystem makes it possible for the party-state to govern the Internet through mainly targeting a limited number of platforms, as almost all types of news producers and news content are converging towards these platforms. Second, major platforms have more resources (e.g., the entire user population as amateur editors) and better

technological capabilities (e.g., algorithms) in policing their sites than the party-state. Third, platform surveillance is a crucial instrument for public opinion control, as constant surveillance invites more pervasive self-censorship. Therefore, the state-platform “collaborative governance” model is expected to be more effective in public opinion control.

“Collaborative governance” over China’s online world is to the advantage of both platforms and the state. For platforms, collaboration with the party-state in Internet governance is the only way to maintain a good relationship with the party-state and thus to ensure their commercial success. Also, collaboration with the party-state in some social schemes (such as the electrical ID card scheme) and strategic technology areas (such as artificial intelligence) helps to consolidate their market dominance in China. For the party-state, governance *through* platforms is not only more efficient than targeting individuals and individual websites, as platforms have the resources and capabilities that the state is unable to match, but also a practical solution in the platform era due to the so-called “problem of scale” (Gillespie, 2017a).

The effectiveness of the “collaborative governance” model depends on the interactions between the state and platforms. From the perspective of the party-state, it needs to maintain an effective control over private platforms, as well as to encourage their collaboration in public opinion control. To achieve the former objective, the party-state has been constantly upgrading its regulations concerning platforms in recent years. Most regulations that I have discussed in this thesis, such as regulations regarding official accounts (CAC, 2017b) and Internet groups (CAC, 2017d), did not even exist when I started to work on this project, demonstrating the great adaptiveness of the party-state in the platform era. To encourage the collaboration of platforms in public opinion control, the party-state has not only incorporated private platforms within its public opinion guidance system (such as including them in the internal briefings and meetings), but also has included them in China’s “cyber power” national strategy, allowing or even inviting them to dominate some strategic information technology areas like artificial intelligence.

It needs to be noted that, although the Chinese party-state under the leadership of Xi Jinping has greatly strengthened China's media and Internet control, challenges in relation to public opinion control still exist on a daily basis. There are at least two explanations for such a situation. Firstly, absolute control is simply impossible in the platform era, given the "problem of scale" and inherent shortcomings of governance through platforms (for example, algorithms cannot gauge the nuance of news content). Secondly, an over-controlled Internet is also not in the interests of the party-state. This is because: (1) the CCP's legitimacy to rule relies not only on political control, but also robust economic performance (Pei, 2012), which requires a vibrant Internet economy; (2) using platforms as a "steam valve" (or "safety valve") to release public anger and resentment and also as a platform to identify potential problems are beneficial for the party-state to maintain social stability (deLisle et al., 2016). That is to say, the "collaborative governance" model does not necessarily mean more complete or stricter Internet control. Instead, the purpose of this model is to more effectively control public opinion, which means timely identifying and dealing with potential threats, such as politically harmful content or organized protests. At the time of writing, this model seems to work effectively for the benefit of the Chinese party-state. However, it is worth noting that the survival of the CCP in the future does not solely depend on effective control of public opinion, but also other factors, especially China's economic performance.

9.2 Research implications

This thesis has provided empirical evidence and an original analytical framework for a current and important issue concerning China's media transformation and politics in the platform era. This section will evaluate the implications and relevance of my key findings in light of previous literature. Moreover, it will discuss the applicability of the "collaborative governance" model in wider national contexts.

9.2.1 Discussion in light of existing literature

This thesis adds to or expands the existing literature in at least three areas: (1) the role and power of platforms regarding news; (2) China's Internet

governance; and (3) state-platform relations. First, this research adds to the rapidly expanding research on news transformation in the platform era (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2016; 2017; 2018). By adopting a comparative perspective, this research has connected China's platform-centered news ecosystem to the global news transformation. It has found that the role of Chinese platforms in relation to news production, distribution, and consumption, and the power of platforms over news organizations are very similar to those in the Western contexts. However, China's news ecosystem has its uniqueness: (1) there is not an exact equivalent of self-media in Western media contexts (see section 6.1.2); (2) Chinese platforms aggregate news content from various types of actors including self-media, while Western platforms aggregate news content mainly from news organizations; (3) Chinese state accounts (millions in total) have a prominent presence on private platforms, becoming one of the three main types of news sources on platforms.

Moreover, by arguing for a state-platform "collaborative governance" model, this thesis not only adds to the key literature about China's Internet governance, most of which focuses on the practices and strategies of the party-state in governing the Internet (e.g., Jiang, 2012; Wang and Hong, 2009), but also advances the research on China's Internet governance to the platform era. Previous research has noted that the Chinese government outsources many censorship and/or surveillance tasks to domestic private Internet companies (e.g., MacKinnon, 2011; Walker and Orttung, 2015), and these companies have no other choices but to cooperate with the government and carry out censorship, given that their licenses can be revoked should they fail to comply (e.g., MacKinnon, 2011; Jiang, 2012). This research further argues that, in the platform-centered online environment, platforms are not only cooperating, but also "collaborating" with the party-state in Internet governance, which is now mostly enforced through platforms. Besides, this research agrees with the conclusion of King et al. (2012) that the main aim of China's Internet censorship is for "curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization" (p.1), which

is still among the main aim of the party-state regarding public opinion control in the platform era (see section 7.1.1).

Furthermore, this research deepens the understanding of the relations between the state and private platforms in authoritarian China. While the rise of private platforms in China's news sphere may seem to be a challenge to the party-state, it turns out that platforms have become both an informatization and a governance tool for the party-state. This conclusion is similar to some previous research on China's media commercialization. For example, many scholars have concluded that although media commercialization in China has brought more autonomy in news reporting, it works in a direction favorable to the CCP rule (e.g., Hadland, 2015; Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 2004). Previous studies on the role of the Internet and social media regarding authoritarian rule have produced binary conclusions. Some (e.g., Lotan et al., 2011) argue that the Internet and social media have disrupted the capability of authoritarian regimes in exercising Internet control. Others contend that, with more pervasive surveillance, the Internet will be a barrier to regime change (e.g., Kalathil and Boas, 2010). This research adds to the latter side of the argument. That is, new technological innovations like digital media platforms can become tools for authoritarian regimes, as long as they are effectively controlled, as in the case of China.

9.2.2 Application of the “Collaborative governance” model

Although the Edward Snowden case in 2013 showed that state-platform “collaborative governance” could happen in many countries, including the United States, the applicability of this model depends on different media contexts and specific content areas. Given that there is “a fundamental reluctance to constrain speech” in countries like the U.S. (Gillespie, 2017a: 2), this model is unlikely to be fully employed in democratic countries for Internet content governance. In contrast, authoritarian countries are supposed to be more inclined to adopt this model, given that authoritarian regimes by nature attach the greatest importance to staying in power and thus they may force platforms to collaborate with them in governing the Internet. However, the reality is more complex. As Pan (2017) notes, the ability of the Chinese

party-state in controlling social media “rests on the dominance of domestic firms” in China’s market; while in most other authoritarian countries, the US-based platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are dominating the social media markets, in which content removal is an “immense challenge” (p.167). As discussed in section 7.2.3, these platforms, as shown in the example of Google, often respond to content removal requests from states at their own discretion. In other words, this model may only be applicable to authoritarian countries whose social media markets are dominated by domestic Internet firms. According to Pan (2017), there are only two authoritarian countries: China and Iran, whose social media markets are dominated by domestic firms; only a number of authoritarian countries (such as Russia, Vietnam, and Malaysia) have a presence of domestic social media sites, but their overall markets are dominated by American platforms.

While the model may not be applicable in most countries in its entirety, it could be useful in many countries in relation to the governance of certain types of content, such as terrorism propaganda, hate speech, and disinformation. On the one hand, national governments need the cooperation or collaboration from platforms to tackle these types of content. Currently, some governments have pressured platforms to police their sites and tackle problematic or illegal content. For example, Germany has passed a law in 2017 requiring platforms to tackle hate speech in a timely manner (see section 8.2.1). In April 2019, British government published an Online Harms White Paper, setting out plans to require platforms to fulfill their “duty of care” to make people safer online. The white paper proposed that companies failed to do so may be issued substantial fines and their senior management members may be personally held liable (DCMS and Home Office, 2019). In the future, more governments may put pressure on platforms to police their sites. On the other hand, from the point of view of platforms, it is in their interests to collaborate with the state to fight terrorism propaganda, hate speech and other problematic content, given that doing so helps them to satisfy the demands from both the governments and the public for a safer online environment. That is why Facebook’s Community Standards have made it clear that some types of content, such as terrorist activity, hate speech and bullying are not

allowed on the platform (Facebook, n.d.-c). In other words, as for the governance of certain content, such as terrorism propaganda and hate speech, it benefits both national governments and platforms to collaborate with each other.

9.3 Research limitations

Undoubtedly, this research has its limitations. Firstly, bias may be embedded within my empirical data. Most of my interviewees are senior media professionals from major news organizations (some of them are, at the same time, self-media operators), and only three interviewees work for platforms. While media professionals, who are important stakeholders in the platform-centered news ecosystem, are able to (or are expected to) provide informed opinions and insightful observations about the whole ecosystem, more evidence directly from platforms would certainly be useful and preferable. Also, the number of self-media operators (four in total) is also limited. That is to say, my interview data may be biased towards the perspectives of media professionals, who are expected to emphasize one side of the story: the disruption brought by platforms to journalistic professionalism, media practices and media market. Bearing this in mind, I have taken the potential bias in my interview data into consideration while conducting analysis and have adopted document analysis as a remedy, as discussed in the methodology chapter.

Secondly, while having acknowledged the empowering effects of platforms on news consumers, this thesis falls short of examining the implications of the autonomy of news consumers for the party-state's public opinion control. The contribution of the thesis would be augmented by studying how news consumers are influenced by the messages that are supposed to guide them in certain directions or studying the extent to which the "collaborative governance" model works with them. However, that was beyond the scope of this thesis.

Thirdly, while examining a current topic has its obvious values; it also has its challenges when compared to examining a historic topic, as things may

change quickly. For example, given that digital media platforms are evolving quickly, some statistics about the three main platforms (WeChat, Weibo and Toutiao) that I focused on may soon be outdated. There is even a possibility that these platforms will be replaced by more popular or different types of platforms within a number of years or a decade (though the dominance of WeChat seems hard to challenge at the time of writing). Also, China's Internet regulations are constantly evolving and upgrading, which means some analysis on specific regulations may not be relevant in the future. However, what really matters in this project is the reliability of the overall conclusions and the robustness of my analytical framework to adapt to future changes.

9.4 Recommendations for future research

Given that the role of platforms regarding news and its implications for news producers, news consumers, the state, and the wider society are still evolving, this project raises more questions than it has answered. This section makes a number of recommendations for future research:

(1) To develop further the state-platform "collaborative governance" model into a fully-constructed theory. In developing such a theory, some basic elements of this model and the mechanisms about how it works should be clearly identified and defined. Such elements may include: state-platform collaboration, state-platform conflicts, the object and mechanisms of collaborative governance, etc.

(2) To apply the state-platform "collaborative governance" in wider contexts. As discussed above, this model may be applied to other media contexts outside China (such as Iran) and other content areas such as hate speech, bullying, and activities and content related to terrorism. In applying this model, three basic elements emerging from this project are pertinent: first, state-platform relations that always involve both collaboration and conflicts; second, Internet governance in the platform era is mainly carried out by platforms; third, platform surveillance is a crucial instrument of Internet governance in the platform era.

(3) To conduct comparative studies between China and other media contexts.

Such comparison may be conducted on a number of aspects, such as the role or the power of platforms regarding news, relations between platforms and news producers, platform regulation, and state-platform relations. In this project, I have conducted limited comparison on the role and power of platforms regarding news, the relations between platforms and news producers, debates around platform regulation between China and Western media contexts. Such comparison has shown many similarities and differences between them, helping to deepen the understanding about the role of Chinese platforms in the news sphere and state-platform relations in China.

(4) To focus on the role of self-media in China. Apart from the rise of platforms, the rise of self-media is also a prominent phenomenon in China's changing media environment. The role of self-media regarding China's media transformation and the relations between self-media and other main news actors (say, news consumers, news organizations, platforms or the state) are all worth further investigation. As self-media are often discussed in the framework of "content entrepreneurship" in China, examining self-media from the perspective of content entrepreneurship or creative industry will also make a viable and valuable project.

(5) To examine the agency and autonomy of Chinese news consumers in the platform era. An expanding literature in the English language emphasizes the role of news consumers or users in the platform era (e.g., Helberger et al., 2015). However, only a few studies (e.g., Yang and Liu, 2014) have investigated the role of news consumers in China's media context, which mainly focus on the strategies of news consumers in circumventing censorship. As discussed in this project, Chinese news consumers enjoy more autonomy in curating their own news feeds and are playing a gatekeeping role in today's news environment. Examining the autonomy of news consumers in China's media context will fill a research gap and will reveal more complexity regarding the effects of China's public opinion control.

(6) To examine the role of the Chinese party-state regarding news production.

As discussed in this project, almost all party/government departments at all levels have opened official accounts on private platforms and have established special teams to operate them (publishing content and engaging with the public). Such a practice means that the state is not merely the media regulator, but also a type of news producer in the platform era. Examining this phenomenon and its implications for the CCP's governance will provide insights on China's media politics and the role of technologies in the state's governance.

(7) To focus on other types of platforms and content. This project has focused on news content and platforms that host large amounts of news content. To change the focus to other types of platforms and content, such as short video platforms and short video content, may reveal very different aspects of China's media scene and Chinese society. In recent years, short video platforms such as Tik Tok (owned by Toutiao's parent company Bytedance) and Kuaishou (Tencent being among its main investors), are becoming very popular in China. Being different from the platforms I discuss in this project, short video platforms are more open to ordinary content producers (especially in terms of social class and educational level), as the threshold of using one's mobile phone to produce a short video to record his/her daily life is often lower than writing a piece of news commentary. That is why the stated value of Kuaishou is "There is no high or low life" (meaning each life is equal and is worthy to be recorded). It is worth investigating how short-video platforms like Tik Tok and Kuaishou are transforming China's society.

It seems that there are many different paths to move forward from this thesis, which is just the first step in studying how digital media platforms have influenced China's news sphere and the state's public opinion control. Next, it may be valuable to observe whether the "collaborative governance" model will provide a useful framework to analyze China's media politics and the state-platform relations and whether it can adapt to future developments. Moreover, given that the role of platforms in the news sphere and online content governance in the platform era are issues of importance beyond China,

it may be worthwhile to examine whether this model is applicable in other media contexts.

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Appendix 1: List of the interviewees

Interviewee No.	Positions held	Interviewing Date
IE-01	vice editor-in-chief of a major news website	March 2016
IE-02	senior executive of a major news magazine, popular self-media operator	March 2016
IE-03	editor-in-chief of a major news website	December 2017
IE-04	vice director of a major radio news channel	December 2017
IE-05	senior executive of a major platform	December 2017
IE-06	senior editor of <i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	December 2017
IE-07	former journalist of <i>People's Daily</i> ; self-media operator	December 2017
IE-08	senior executive of a popular news platform	December 2017
IE-09	senior journalist of <i>China Central Television</i>	January 2018
IE-10	former journalist of <i>Southern Metropolis</i>	January 2018
IE-11	senior executive of a major news platform	January 2018
IE-12	senior editor of a central news organization; popular self-media operator	February 2018
IE-13	popular self-media operator; former journalist of <i>Southern Weekend</i>	March 2018
IE-14	senior editor of a central news organization	March 2018
IE-15	former senior editor of <i>China Central Television</i>	March 2018
IE-16	senior executive of a media association; former media executive	April 2018

Appendix 2: Interview guide

General questions for all interviewees:

- (1) Could you briefly talk about your news-related working experience, such as how many years have you worked in this area and what are your main responsibilities?
- (2) What do you think of the role of Chinese digital media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, and Toutiao, in the news sphere?
- (3) Have you seen some changes brought by platforms with regard to news production, news distribution, and news consumption in China?
- (4) How do you describe the relations between platforms and news producers, such as news organizations and self-media?
- (5) How do you compare the content from news organizations and self-media? How do you compare their influence on China's online public opinion?
- (6) How do you think of the influence of platforms on China's online public opinion?
- (7) Could you describe the relations between China's platforms and the state or the government?
- (8) Do you think the private ownership of Chinese major platforms a concern for the party and the government? Why has the Chinese state tolerated the role of private platforms in the news sphere?
- (9) How do you think of China's current online governance system?

Additional questions for interviewees from platforms:

- (10) What are the mechanisms and criteria for your content distribution? Does your platform prioritize certain types of content or content from certain types of news producers?
- (11) How does your platform moderate content? What are the criteria for your content moderation? What are the main problems or difficulties in content moderation?

Additional questions for interviewees from news organizations:

(12) How has your organization responded to challenges brought by platforms?

(13) How do you think of the future of news organizations in today's news environment?

Additional questions for self-media interviewees:

(14) What are the main differences between working as self-media operators and working for news organizations?

(15) Have your articles ever been deleted by platforms? If so, what articles were deleted and for what reasons?