Special Issue

China's internet controls: What if citizens disengage?

Matt DeButts(iD) and Jennifer Pan(iD)
Stanford University, USA

Abstract
For thirty years, the Chinese internet has been characterized by engagement between citizens and the government, and between the Chinese internet and the global internet. In this commentary, we formalize the concept of *disengagement*: the unwillingness to participate in digital activity. We review the origins of disengagement, its association with other social trends, and evaluate the possibility of its emergence. We argue that disengagement may have profound social, political, and economic consequences for the country. Finally, we call for future scholarship with renewed focus on disengagement and its consequences.

Keywords
Activism, censorship, civil society, government, netizens, propaganda

When the internet debuted in China, many observers foresaw a new era of engagement. Inside the country, the internet could connect citizens to each other and to their government, facilitating interest groups, civic advocacy and political participation. Outside the country, the internet could connect China's 1.2 billion citizens, which for 40 years had remained relatively isolated from the world in Maoist self-reliance, to an international community eager to share information and receive information in turn. These two types of connections—between citizens and government *inside* China, and between China and the world *outside* it—were widely expected to herald new forms of social, political, and economic participation. The base unit of this digital participation is "engagement": the willingness to undertake joint activity.

In the internet's early days, many assumed that the those new forms of engagement would soon transform the country. In the decades that followed, two strains of

scholarship emerged to study how that transformation would occur. One strain emphasized online political engagement between Chinese citizens and their government, situated within larger academic debates of whether the internet would "liberate" or "repress" the public (e.g. Diamond, 2010; King et al., 2013; Lorentzen, 2014; Qin et al., 2017; Zeng, 2016). The other strain, more often associated with qualitative scholarship, emphasized social and political engagement among citizens themselves, including the numerous forms of negotiation, resistance, collaboration, and meaning-making taking place in conversation with and concurrent to government control (e.g. Gleiss, 2015;

The two authors contributed equally

Corresponding author:
Matt DeButts, Stanford University, 450 Jane Stanford Way Bldg 120, Rm 110, Stanford, CA 94305, USA.
Email: mdebutts@stanford.edu

Herold & Marolt, 2011; Szablewicz, 2014). Both lines of inquiry enriched our understanding of Chinese society. By embracing the citizen-government axis of engagement, scholars such as Deibert (2002) uncovered the Chinese internet's many tensions—territoriality versus distributed cyberspace, economic growth versus online instability, proactive versus reactive regulations—that continue to characterize the country to this day, while others, such as MacKinnon (2008, 2011), distinguished among types and uses of internet spaces, emphasizing the internet as a "medium" of political activity rather than its cause. Contemporaneous to these efforts, other scholars sought to highlight other axes of engagement: Yang (2009), for example, argued for the vibrancy of individual-led political contention on the Chinese internet, Yang (2016) pushed us to understand political controls as culturally productive, and Fang and Repnikova (2018) showed how even a single label can be the site of political contestation among competing online groups. What was at stake for much of this scholarship was not whether engagement was occurring, but rather which engagement to study first, and what its consequences would be for the country.

But not all scholars were thus inclined. Some scholars also sought to understand why digital engagement was *not* occurring. One puzzle concerned the surprising insularity of the Chinese internet. As it turns out, Chinese and non-Chinese web traffic remained largely separate from each other. The Chinese internet was more properly an "intra-"net, with the majority of its internet users remaining on Chinese websites, similar to other linguistic communities like Japan's or Poland's (Taneja & Wu, 2014). Others pondered the absence of Chinese media platforms in other countries, drawing links between their domestic preponderance and the success of government censorship (Pan, 2017). Meta-reviews of Chinese internet research wondered why overseas scholars focused so heavily on studying politics and democracy while domestic scholars focused on its social repercussions, especially on education (Herold & De Seta, 2015). Some scholarship even denied that political engagement was occurring at scale: the Chinese internet, they argued, produced "the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos" as elsewhere in the world (Leibold, 2011), even alongside its familiar irony and sarcasm (Gong & Yang, 2010).

Amid these investigations into non-engagement, we can observe seedlings of what we term "disengagement": the withdrawal from digital participation. Blogs that cultivated intellectual exchange, which had thrived in the internet's early days, began to collapse by the 2000s: "As long as the state does not dramatically change its policies," wrote Yongmoing Zhou (2006), "a truly independent intellectual electronic press will [. . .] not emerge in the near future." Geremie Barmé (1999) noted the "graying" of Chinese culture, characterized by "hopelessness, uncertainty [. . .] and a large dose of fatalism." Writing about blogging culture, Haiqing Yu (2007) argued that the internet has become "the new medium" for this expression of fatalism. These works suggest that for Chinese internet users disillusioned with the vision of the internet to which the government was daily aspiring, disengagement offered a strategy with minimal risk and moderate reward. Rather than contesting the government on the internet—which, these online masses concluded, is a contest they were doomed to lose—they exited the contest altogether.

Citizen disengagement may represent a hidden challenge to the government. After all, many of the reasons why the Chinese government has embraced the internet—its capacity to measure public opinion (Jia, 2019), to distract the public from pressing issues (Roberts, 2018), to mobilize consumers against foreign adversaries (Shan & Chen, 2022), to monitor government performance (Jiang & Xu, 2009), to surveil minorities and dissidents (Qiang, 2019), to propagate government viewpoints to domestic and foreign audiences (Lu & Pan, 2021)—each rest implicitly upon the assumption that the Chinese internet is a place where Chinese citizens want to be. To some unknown extent, the Chinese internet's vibrancy contains a tautology: it is vibrant because people think it is vibrant, and thus they continue to post there. Belief is the fuel that propels the cycle onward. But if that belief breaks down—if audiences disengage—the Chinese government may find itself presiding over something of a digital pleasure-garden, filled with distractions and amusements but devoid of the social contention that once animated it. In that scenario the internet will no longer relay the public's opinion to the government (Hassid, 2015; Pan & Chen, 2018), provide a site for proxy accountability (Chen & Li,

2024; Dimitrov, 2013), or a channel for public legitimacy and stability (Gunitsky, 2015; Sullivan, 2014; Zhang, 2022). Disengagement, in short, offers a sort of Pyrrhic bargain: "none for me," it says, "but none for you either."

In the past three decades, engagement has predominated over disengagement as, by and large, Chinese citizens have remained optimistic about the internet's potential. Writing in 2008, MacKinnon (2008) noted that many Chinese netizens see themselves "not as oppressed victims who are waiting to be liberated" but rather "tenacious optimists, slowly and patiently pushing back the boundaries." In interviews, netizens remarked that public expression on the internet made their lives "much richer" (Wallis, 2011). Online outcry repeatedly proved politically potent: the government reversed policies, arrested corrupt officials, and introduced new laws after observing online controversies (Hassid, 2015; Qiaoan & Teets, 2020). Corporations, and many consumers, looked to e-commerce for new opportunities for economic growth and have found it (Kluver & Yang, 2005). That optimism about the internet has tracked rosy attitudes toward the country's growth more broadly. Economic inequality, though severe, was largely accepted by the population as a transitory consequence of growth (Whyte, 2010), and countrywide polls consistently showed that majorities of Chinese citizens felt that the next five years would be better than the last five (Pew Research Center, 2005). The country, most people seemed to feel, was moving in the right direction. The internet was both a site of that change and a mechanism driving it forward.

Yet perhaps it is worth asking what happens if the balance between engagement and disengagement begins to shift. We believe it is possible that more people are disengaging today than in the past. It is not hard to see why. Thirty years after its advent in China, the Chinese internet has never seemed so tightly controlled, never looked less like its foreign counterparts (Creemers, 2017); it convulses with idiosyncratic debate, often nationalistic and frequently ignored by the English-language internet, with only a fraction of outside information passing through the Great Firewall (Lu et al., 2022; Zeng & Chan, 2021). Opportunities to engage with the outside world are diminishing. Multinational companies speak of "de-risking," by which they mean exit from China (Farrell & Newman, 2023); an emerging trend of "techno-nationalism" is leading to restriction of the very components from which the Chinese internet is physically constructed (Capri, 2020). Put simply, it is becoming more challenging to engage meaningfully on China's internet today.

Disengagement may also be linked to larger trends. The Chinese economy is struggling, facing the twin threats of low growth and deflation alongside rising public debt (Lubin, 2024), and in 2023, the birthrate dropped to the lowest on record (Master, 2024). Politics has stagnated under Xi Jinping's "personalist authoritarianism" (Düben, 2020); netizens speak of "*rùn*-ning" from the country via emigration to escape draconian political and social controls (Ni, 2022). The country's zero-covid policies, while enjoying early success, proved onerous over time. Journalists—ever on the front line of the country's changes—are reporting widespread disillusionment, disengagement, and waning youth belief that their lives will be better than the lives of their parents (Johnson, 2023; Kuhn, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Recent academic research on the appeal of "rural influencers" (Zhang, 2020), the "lie flat" movement that disavows upward mobility (Gong & Liu, 2022), and "leftover women" who choose not to get married or have children (Gui, 2020) imply a kind of disaffection with urban life which, if not identical to, nevertheless rhymes with journalists' reported pessimism.

If this proto-trend—more a constellation of anecdotes than a proven phenomenon—materializes and proves enduring, it may open up a new suite of questions about the Chinese internet and its governance. When a person stops trying to speak their mind, what happens? Is a hydraulic metaphor appropriate, where repressed speech builds until it resembles a "nearly physical pressure" (Scott, 1990)? Does repressed speech emerge in disguise, as irony or satire (Nordin & Richaud, 2014)? The white paper movement of December 2022 represents perhaps the largest offline protest of urban youth since 1989. Those protests were preceded by months of fruitless online protests of zero-covid policies. Did protests emerge *because* youth had lost faith in the power of internet outrage to influence the zero-covid policy? Or did protests emerge *despite* their enduring belief in that power?

For thirty years, Chinese people have seized the internet to advance a billion personal and collective agendas. Whatever its motives or imperfections, Chinese internet governance still permitted those pursuits. But it may not always. Where those pursuits go, if they forgo the internet, is the question we ask of the decades to come.

ORCID iDs

Matt DeButts iD https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3751-8756

Jennifer Pan iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4818-0122

References

Barmé, G. (1999). *In the red: On contemporary Chinese culture*. Columbia University Press.

Capri, A. (2020). *Semiconductors at the heart of the US-China tech war*. Hinrich Foundation.

Chen, S., & Li, Y. (2024). Accountability from cyberspace? Scandal exposure on the Internet and official governance in China. *Political Science Research and Methods*, *12*(1), 130–145.

Creemers, R. (2017). Cyber China: Upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *26*(103), 85–100.

Deibert, R. J. (2002). Dark guests and great firewalls: The Internet and Chinese security policy. *Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(1), 143–159.

Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation technology. *Journal of Democracy 21*(3): 69–83.

Dimitrov, M. K. (Ed.). (2013). *Why communism did not collapse: Understanding authoritarian regime resilience in Asia and Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Düben, B. A. (2020). Xi Jinping and the end of Chinese exceptionalism. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *67*(2), 111–128.

Fang, K., & Repnikova, M. (2018). Demystifying "Little Pink": The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China. *New Media & Society*, *20*(6), 2162–2185.

Farrell, H., & Newman, A. (2023). The new economic security state: How de-risking will remake geopolitics. *Foreign Affairs*, *102*, 106–122.

Gleiss, M. S. (2015). Speaking up for the suffering (br) other: Weibo activism, discursive struggles, and minimal politics in China. *Media, Culture & Society*, *37*(4), 513–529.

Gong, H., & Yang, X. (2010). Digitized parody: The politics of egao in contemporary China. *China Information*, *24*(1), 3–26.

Gong, J., & Liu, T. (2022). Decadence and relational freedom among China's gay migrants: Subverting heteronormativity by "lying flat." *China Information*, *36*(2), 200–220.

Gui, T. (2020). "Leftover women" or single by choice: Gender role negotiation of single professional women in contemporary China. *Journal of Family Issues*, *41*(11), 1956–1978.

Gunitsky, S. (2015). Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability. *Perspectives on Politics*, *13*(1), 42–54.

Hassid, J. (2015). China's responsiveness to internet opinion: A double-edged sword. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, *44*(2), 39–68.

Herold, D. K., & De Seta, G. (2015). Through the looking glass: Twenty years of Chinese internet research. *The Information Society*, *31*(1), 68–82.

Herold, D. K., & Marolt, P. (Eds.). (2011). *Online society in China: Creating, celebrating, and instrumentalising the online carnival* (Vol. 25). Taylor & Francis.

Jia, L. (2019). What public and whose opinion? A study of Chinese online public opinion analysis. *Communication and the Public*, *4*(1), 21–34.

Jiang, M., & Xu, H. (2009). Exploring online structures on Chinese government portals: Citizen political participation and government legitimation. *Social Science Computer Review*, *27*(2), 174–195.

Johnson, I. (2023). Xi's age of stagnation: The great walling-off of China. *Foreign Affairs*, *102*, 102–117.

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, *107*(2), 326–343.

Kluver, R., & Yang, C. (2005). The Internet in China: A meta-review of research. *The Information Society*, *21*(4), 301–308.

Kuhn, A. (2024, January 17). Affluent Chinese have been moving to Japan since the COVID lockdowns. *National Public Radio*. https://www.npr.org/2024/01/17/1221849861/china-japan-immigration

Leibold, J. (2011). Blogging alone: China, the internet, and the democratic illusion? *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *70*(4), 1023–1041.

Lorentzen, P. (2014). China's strategic censorship. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(2), 402–414.

Lu, Y., & Pan, J. (2021). Capturing clicks: How the Chinese government uses clickbait to compete for visibility. *Political Communication*, *38*(1–2), 23–54.

Lu, Y., Schaefer, J., Park, K., Joo, J., & Pan, J. (2022). How information flows from the world to China. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *29*, 305–327.

Lubin, D. (2024, January 22). China's economy is becoming a drag on global growth. *Chatham House*. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/chinas-economy-becoming-drag-global-growth

MacKinnon, R. (2008). Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China. *Public Choice*, *134*(1–2), 31–46.

MacKinnon, R. (2011). China's "networked authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy*, *22*, 32–46.

Master, F. (2024, January 17). China's population drops for second year, with record low birth rate. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/

Ni, V. (2022, July 20). "Run philosophy"":" The Chinese citizens seeking to leave amid Covid uncertainty. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/20/run-philosophy-the-chinese-citizens-seeking-to-leave-amid-covid-uncertainty

Nordin, A., & Richaud, L. (2014). Subverting official language and discourse in China? Type river crab for harmony. *China Information*, *28*(1), 47–67.

Pan, J. (2017). How market dynamics of domestic and foreign social media firms shape strategies of Internet censorship. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *64*(3–4), 167–188.

Pan, J., & Chen, K. (2018). Concealing corruption: How Chinese officials distort upward reporting of online grievances. *American Political Science Review*, *112*(3), 602–620.

Pew Research Center. (2005, November 16). *China's optimism*. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2005/11/16/chinas-optimism/

Qiang, X. (2019). The road to digital unfreedom: President Xi's surveillance state. *Journal of Democracy*, *30*(1), 53–67.

Qiaoan, R., & Teets, J. C. (2020). Responsive authoritarianism in China–A review of responsiveness in Xi and Hu administrations. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *25*(1), 139–153.

Qin, B., Strömberg, D., & Wu, Y. (2017). Why does China allow freer social media? Protests versus surveillance and propaganda. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(1), 117–140.

Roberts, M. (2018). *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China's great firewall*. Princeton University Press.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.

Shan, W., & Chen, J. (2022). The Little Pinks: Self-mobilized nationalism and state allies in Chinese cyberspace. *International Journal of China Studies*, *12*, 25–46.

Sullivan, J. (2014). China's Weibo: Is faster different? *New Media & Society*, *16*(1), 24–37.

Szablewicz, M. (2014). The "losers" of China's Internet: Memes as "structures of feeling" for disillusioned young netizens. *China Information*, *28*(2), 259–275.

Taneja, H., & Wu, A. X. (2014). Does the Great Firewall really isolate the Chinese? Integrating access blockage with cultural factors to explain web user behavior. *The Information Society*, *30*(5), 297–309.

Wallis, C. (2011). New media practices in China: Youth patterns, processes, and politics. *International Journal of Communication*, *5*, 31.

Whyte, M. (2010). *Myth of the social volcano: Perceptions of inequality and distributive injustice in contemporary China*. Stanford University Press.

Yang, F. (2016). Rethinking China's Internet censorship: The practice of recoding and the politics of visibility. *New Media & Society*, *18*(7), 1364–1381.

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.

Yu, H. (2007). Blogging everyday life in Chinese Internet culture. *Asian Studies Review*, *31*(4), 423–433.

Zeng, J. (2016). China's date with big data: Will it strengthen or threaten authoritarian rule? *International Affairs*, *92*(6), 1443–1462.

Zeng, J., & Chan, C. H. (2021). A cross-national diagnosis of infodemics: Comparing the topical and temporal features of misinformation around COVID-19 in China, India, the US, Germany and France. *Online Information Review*, *45*(4), 709–728.

Zhang, A. (2023, December 14). The Chinese migrants of Chiang Mai: Voices from a new diaspora. *The Dial*. https://www.thedial.world/issue-11/exiled-chinese-chiang-mai-thailand

Zhang, X. (2020). *The rural video influencers in China: On the new edge of urbanization* [Doctoral thesis]. https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/33bd5f52-b308-459c-9e55-807a2471d03c/content

Zhang, Y. (2022). Passive political legitimacy: How the Chinese online sphere went from challenging to supporting the state within the past decade. *The China Journal*, *88*(1), 29–54.

Zhou, Y. (2006). *Historicizing online politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and political participation in China*. Stanford University Press.

Author biographies

Matt DeButts is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication at Stanford University. His research focuses on media, linguistics, and authoritarian politics.

Jennifer Pan is a Professor of Communication and a Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University. Her research focuses on political communication and authoritarian politics.