Article

Neoliberal governance or digitalized autocracy? The rising market for online opinion surveillance in China.

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Abstract

Much recent attention referring to surveillance practice in China has been paid to Chinese authorities' authoritarian strategies like hiring online inspectors and building the internet firewall. While this focus meets the conventional imagination of a non-democratic regime, it neglects the underlying policy changes and structural arrangements with which the Chinese government conducts its governance in the era of big data. My ongoing study demonstrates there has appeared a market through which various for-profit institutions are selling data services to help the governments conduct domestic governance in China. Through purchasing internet information surveillance systems, which are based on technologies like data mining, sentiment analysis and cloud computing, most Chinese local governments have incorporated the surveillance of public online opinion into their daily work. This phenomenon implies that a neoliberal form of governance which aims at monitoring and guiding public sentiment is taking shape in authoritarian China.

Introduction

Surveillance has attracted significant public attention, especially since the highly controversial 2013 disclosure by Edward Snowden. The rise of literature on surveillance not only empirically displays various forms of surveillance practice around the world but also provides expansive theoretical possibilities to locate the changing role and various mechanisms through which surveillance, as the "central feature of modernity" (Lyon 1994: 37), shapes human subject and social order.

In China, along with the increasing number of netizens and the rising popularity of social network, the media and academia also have begun to focus on the surveillance phenomenon in this authoritarian context. Authoritarian strategies, such as hiring online inspectors, building the internet firewall, and censoring online opinion have become the focus of this attention; digital surveillance is considered a new tool for the Chinese party state to repress civil society. In this literature, China is depicted as evolving into the modern equivalent of 'Big Brother' equipped with a 'digitalized totalitarian weapon' (Liu 2016; Petricic 2017). While the findings of previous research partially display Chinese authorities' strategies of dealing with challenges brought by the development of ICT, their dystopian depiction of the non-democratic regime neglects the underlying policy changes and structural arrangements with which the Chinese government conducts its governance in the era of big data.

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Current empirical studies on surveillance tend to divide into two branches. On the one hand, there exist many theoretical issues available to frame various surveillance practices in Western contexts; their focus includes not only the impact of surveillance on democratic development but also topics such as neoliberal marketing, racial inequality, and privacy rights (Bennett 2015; Ball 2009; Crampton 2015). On the other hand, when academia talks about surveillance in the context of China, the discussion of surveillance, which is narrowly understood as a form of political control by the authoritarian state on its citizens, is only dealt with as an indicator of an antagonistic state-society relation under this regime. This distinction in the literature compresses the space of dialogue through which we can integrate various surveillance practices across different regimes; moreover, it leads to a barren theoretical imagination for empirically studying surveillance in China.

Based on the data of my ongoing study of online opinion surveillance in China, in this article I argue that a market has appeared through which various for-profit institutions are selling data services to help the different levels of government in China conduct domestic governance. I also provide a preliminary introduction about the market for online opinion surveillance in China. After briefly contrasting online opinion management in Chinese politics with similar data-driven surveillance in business marketing and Western democracy, I conclude by suggesting a set of broader theoretical considerations, including possible connections among authoritarian repression, neoliberal marketing, and surveillance.

Chinese internet control: From censoring information to managing online opinion

Since the early 1990s, internet use in China has grown at a tremendous pace: the number of China's online users, the world's largest, hit 668 million in 2015 (Xinhua 2015). Traditional wisdom would suggest that the internet and new media technologies will lead to liberation by promoting civil society and by making autocratic control by the government more difficult (Aman and Jayroe 2013; Diamond 2010; Kalathil and Boas 2010). How authoritarian China is dealing with these challenges has drawn much attention. On the one hand, there is much literature proving that the internet provides a new space for the Chinese people to express political discontent, which is hard to channel in the traditional way (Hassid 2012; Qiang 2011; Tong 2015; Yang 2009, 2014). On the other hand, more work has appeared recently showing that the authoritarian state has begun to include the internet in its governance toolkit (Brady 2006; Harwit and Clark 2013; Mackinnon 2011; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Sullivan 2014). It seems that the latter issue receives more attention from academia as it demonstrates the authoritarian resilience of China through the dimension of digital politics.

While abundant evidence shows that the Chinese government intentionally restricts internet speech and manipulates people's online discussions (Chen, Pan and Xu 2016; King, Pan and Roberts 2016; Stern and Hassid 2012; Tong and Lei 2012), scant literature provides systematic empirical data about how the practice of censorship and manipulation operates. In this sense, online opinion surveillance remains a phenomenon: we already know about its existence although we lack sufficient information about its working mechanism. According to some leaked documents and Chinese domestic reports, the Chinese state has hired numerous netizens as online inspectors, who are usually called the 'Fifty-Cent Army (五毛党)' (paid by the government) or 'official internet opinion analysts (輿情分析师)' to both monitor and guide online public opinion. These sources of information depict internet inspectors as people who receive a salary from the government, sit in front of their PCs gathering public opinions on microblog sites, and compile reports for the decision-makers; some of them are even required to pose as ordinary netizens as they strategically post positive information in order to 'neutralize' the negative comments made by critics about the authorities (*The Economist* 2016). Although this depiction simplifies the complexity of the online public-sentiment management conducted by the Chinese party state, it does indicate that the Chinese authorities not only strictly regulate the internet against users' expression of dissent by setting agendas and blocking information, but they also attempt to guide and control people's opinions and sentiment based on surveillance of their online opinion. Some recent research has disclosed the inspectors' basic working

strategies and provided us with an estimation of the number of these state commentators (Han 2015; King, Pan and Roberts 2016; Miller 2016). However, because the manipulation of public opinion remains a sensitive topic in China, most current analysis on this issue can only rely on leaked documents and textual or behavioural data collected from the internet to infer the government's action. We lack a systematic examination of the institutional background, principal participators, and governance technologies underlying the phenomenon of the surveillance of online opinion in China.

The rising market for online opinion surveillance

Most existing research automatically considers Chinese online opinion surveillance as highly sensitive and confidential; however, my work shows that the surveillance and guidance of online public opinion in the Chinese political field is not so secretive that we must rely only on leaked internal documents. In fact, we can use standard methods, for example interviewing people who work as online opinion analysts, to uncover and depict Chinese internet surveillance.

Through purchasing surveillance software and related data services, Chinese governments at different levels (such as provinces, cities, districts, central government) have incorporated the surveillance of online public opinion into their daily work. The abundance of tendering information publicized on the governmental procurement website¹ implies that buying commercialized data-analytics services to monitor online public opinion is becoming a regular and requisite expenditure of local and central governments. An internet opinion analyst told me:

In recent years, for a local government, purchasing an online opinion surveillance platform is not a big deal. [It] is similar to buying a new set of computers or new office software. It is very normal and usual. The government just needs to sign a purchasing note and reach internal agreement(内部通过). There is no big issue. It is necessary to have a set of surveillance software. You are problematic if you do not have one.²

In fact, the need for monitoring online opinion can be tracked back more than ten years. Since 2006, in official administrative documents, the party state has highlighted the importance of collecting and analyzing public opinion for the prevention of possible social conflicts (General Office of the State Council 2006). Furthermore, in 2016, the central government issued an official administrative notification demanding that local governments at all levels construct a quick-response, working mechanism to monitor, analyze, and respond to internet public opinion related to governmental affairs (General Office of the State Council 2016). This administrative order not only demands that governmental sectors conduct real-time monitoring on citizens' online expression, but it also requires local propaganda officials to use new media platforms, such as weibo or wechat, to guide online sentiment and to achieve public support. The shift in the Chinese government's strategy from ex post facto censoring to preemptive engagement with netizens' online expressions has created a demand from government agencies for the ability to effectively survey online conversations in real-time and has catalyzed the growth of online opinion monitoring as a profitable business (Mai 2016).

Under this context, a huge market, driven by the political demand for internet governance, has come into being. There is an urgent demand from governmental clients to have real-time control on what netizens are saying about the government, which is obviously impossible for human-based monitoring. Relying on big data technologies (data processing, data crawling, and sentiment analysis), for-profit agencies are developing customer-oriented surveillance software to collect news items, comments, and online discussions from a wide range of internet platforms, such as forums, blogs, social networking sites, news

¹ See <http://www.ccgp.gov.cn/>.

² Interview with analyst A.

portals, and private instant messengers. Just by installing such client softwares on their PC or mobile phones and by setting up the related key words, governmental clients can quickly know the sentimental tendency, variation trend, and diffusing track of public opinions, all of which can be easily identified by the built-in algorithms of the software.

As well as purchasing surveillance software to collect textual data of online expression, governmental clients also buy online opinion reporting (輿情報告), which is another popular product in this market. For them, the collection of online opinion serves two important purposes: guiding online opinion and achieving public support. Government officials also expect online opinion reports will help them develop effective strategies to neutralize negative comments and conduct positive propaganda. This need for more specific suggestions on guiding online opinion is addressed by some media organizations as target marketing. Media organizations such as the Xinhua News, China Daily, People's Daily, and China Youth Daily have started their own online opinion monitoring centres to provide this service. Among all these agencies, the People's Internet Public Opinion Office (人民網輿情監測室) is the most well known; it relies on the resources of People's Daily and People's Daily Online. Since 2012, this agency (<http://yuqing.people.com.cn/>) has integrated the funding from People's Daily and Securities Times and transformed itself into an information value-added service company with the primary business of monitoring, estimating, forewarning, managing, and repairing online public opinion. As of 2012, this business has earned around USD 29 million revenue, which represents the second-biggest source of income for People Daily Online (Mai 2016).

While these media organizations do not have the technological capacity to develop their own surveillance system, their media resources and rich experience of interpreting central-government policies helps them produce analytical reports of online opinion going beyond basic quantitative description. An analyst who worked in a media-owned surveillance agency told me:

There is a difference in depth among different kinds of reports. The reports written by the ** (a media agency) may be three times more expensive than those written by an ordinary technology company. Ordinary analysts just use descriptive data such as percentages, some classifications, and other things we could easily read from the data. However, for experts from these official media, it is different. Specialists can link one issue to surrounding events, and sometimes they can analyze it from the political perspective. We know the last discussion of the boss of the central government; for example, Prime Minister Li talked about the idea of a shared economy and some related policies. And [we have] some official documents released from the central government. We [the analysts] use this information to estimate current public opinion. We will check whether deeper connections exist between them. Accordingly, we know that some of our business [may have potential political risk], and so we cannot do it.³

Mai (2016) argues that it is the media organizations' interpretative capacity and knowledge about the institutional culture of Chinese government as well as their ideological preference that induce governments to prefer such organizations as People's Daily when they themselves do not have sophisticated knowledge in data analytics. The above attributes also explain why the reports written by specialists from media agencies are more expensive. Compared with objective data about netizens' sentiments and attitudes, government clients seem to care more about whether netizens' understanding about local public opinion could fit with the related policies from the central government. Because the rising industry of online opinion surveillance is embedded within the special political context of China, it is necessary to include the political, cultural, and related institutional structure in any explanation of the government's market behaviour of purchasing online opinion monitoring services.

³ Interview with Chairman B.

Neoliberal governance, data politics and online opinion surveillance

Although the rising industry of monitoring online opinion in China increasingly draws attention from the media, very little has been written in the broader academic literature about the theoretical implications behind this phenomenon. In fact, systematical collection of sentiment information from the internet is common in Western societies. Andrejevic (2013) identifies the trend that natural-language deciphering software increasingly enables political organizations and marketing companies to conduct sentiment analysis of messages in social networks and text messages. He argues that advances in data technologies make it possible to sift through all the online expression without actually reading it; this ability produced a preemptive and productive power to minimize negative sentiment and to maximize emotional investment and management through the attempt to channel or shape the ambient sentiment around particular issues, products, and so on. While the marketing world in the interactive era is still believed to be at the forefront of attempts to capitalize on the capture of opinion and emotion, the case of Chinese online opinion surveillance shows that authoritarian regimes can also incorporate marketing strategies in their regular political functioning. Although Chinese authorities usually adopt ideological terms such as “serving the masses” or “maintaining social stability” to legitimize their behaviour of monitoring online opinion and also hold a critical position against neoliberal discourse, nevertheless the logic of neoliberal marketing still influences Chinese governance in a subtle way. When I interviewed the chairman of a data company providing online opinion monitoring software to governments, he clearly expressed his approval of the marketization of politics:

[I do not like the government’s term ‘guidance of online opinion’] but I have no choice; I must use this term in fact. People all call our job as [a part of] ‘guidance of internet opinion’. I do not call it ‘guidance’ in our products. We name it the new revolution for the marketing of governments. [If]you are a government sector, you also need to market yourself. Business companies need marketing; individuals need marketing. Why don’t you governments need marketing? You need that.⁴

While some similarities seem to exist between neoliberal marketing and authoritarian politics, it may be a little arbitrary to assert that the case of Chinese online opinion surveillance just represents a typical combination between the two in China. It remains ambiguous to what extent and in what form authoritarian political rules and neoliberal marketing logic would assimilate the other in this process. Although the inner connection between authoritarianism and neoliberalism is not a fresh topic, previous literature mainly focuses on how the expansion of neoliberal economic order around the world is promoted by authoritarian repression (Bruff 2014). Considering that neoliberalism is viewed as being fundamentally about the ‘free market’ and ‘individual agency’ (Harvey 2005; Bevir 2011; Foster 2016), the research on Chinese online opinion surveillance will show whether the commercialization of ideological propaganda and the guidance of citizens’ online expression in my case could represent a special form of combination through which authoritarianism utilizes neoliberalism to maintain its legitimacy in the era of big data. However, it may be too optimistic to expect that some democratization would be brought by the expansion of neoliberal marketing techniques within an authoritarian context. In other words, it is not clear whether the rising online opinion surveillance represents that Chinese authorities are paying more and more attention to public opinion and are attempting to market their policies in a more deliberative and transparent way. Considering that typical authoritarian policies such as internet control and information censorship still play a significant role in China, the relation between online opinion surveillance and other strategies of internet governance must be included into the consideration of the issue.

Moreover, in democratic contexts, a similar trend of political usage of data-mining and sentiment analysis also exists. Scholars have shown that political parties in democratic states pay commercial data-brokerage

⁴ Ibid.

firms to collect data about political opinions and social relationships in order to identify and target voters in campaigns (Bennett 2015; Ball et al. 2010). While some scholars contend that these practices are essentially anti-democratic because they discourage participation and deliberation by transforming citizens into unthinking consumers, others consider voter surveillance as “a more benign, efficient and legitimate way to reach voters and connect with them about public policy” (Bennett 2015).

The current debate on the relationship between surveillance and democracy in Western states inspires us to reflect on the influence of online opinion surveillance on the growth of civil society in China. Although the internet provides Chinese citizens with a new protest platform and makes them better informed about and more engaged in social and political affairs (Yang 2003, 2012), we should still stay cautious about the argument that the internet will exert a continuous influence on the development of civil society. China’s users value the internet as a means of communication and expression, but the rising industry of online opinion surveillance shows that the party state is using ICT technology and market resources to make this expression controllable. The cooperation between government sectors and for-profit data service providers implies a structural shift through which new constellations of the state’s relations with non-state agencies are being formed to build a more networked and multi-level mode of social control. This shift enhances authorities’ capacity for handling voluminous data of online expression and also increases the vulnerability of protestors who express dissent through the internet. In an authoritarian society, the data technology used for targeted marketing can be easily transformed into targeted surveillance over online dissenters. In this sense, what threatens Chinese civil society may not be the transformation from citizens to consumers, but instead it is the risk that budding political expression is being prematurely transformed into modulatable information flow. Before online expression realizes its potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics, authoritarian principles will have dominated the state’s administrative operation for a long time. In this context, it is difficult to develop targeted surveillance into tools for mobilizing political participation by connecting certain citizens to public policy. A more likely trend is that the public sphere will be shrunk under the converging attack from both existing authoritarian repression and newly fashioned neoliberal marketing.

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