

# CHINA'S PUBLIC OPINION MANAGEMENT

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TIGHTENING THE GRIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 161 • October 2014



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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TIGHTENING THE GRIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE



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FIIA Briefing Paper 161  
October 2014

- The number of netizens in China is growing year on year and the increase in the use of mobile technologies to access the internet is the most notable trend of late. Around half of the Chinese population are now internet users.
- The Chinese leadership has tightened internet control since August 2013. In February 2014, China established Central Internet Security and Information Leading Group, headed by President Xi Jinping, to monitor Chinese cyberspace. Defamatory social media posts were criminalized, and the first sentence was imposed in April 2014.
- Despite stricter internet control, criticism of the state and politicians has often been tolerated in social media, whereas any content that promotes offline collective action is systematically censored. However, the idea that the development of the internet in China would lead to significant political change seems unwarranted in the current circumstances.
- Poll data released on September 9 show that almost 90 per cent of the Chinese respondents harbour negative views about Japan. Internet forums and increasing commercialization of the traditional media are contributing to this public opinion trend, which complicates the handling of China's turbulent relations with Japan.

The Global Security research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Both the media and public opinion have assumed larger roles with regard to China's foreign policy-making, to which end the Chinese authoritarian regime is attempting to maintain control over such influences with censorship. This briefing paper examines the roles that various media channels play in Chinese state-society relations, and the tools used to manage information flows and public discourse online.

Despite significant economic growth and rising living standards, recent years have brought new challenges to the Chinese party-state with respect to maintaining societal stability. The development of information technologies and the evolution of the media industry have shaped the role played by the media in discussing political issues, and have limited the propaganda machinery's ability to control information flows. In addition, online communities have crafted a space for the like-minded to discuss current issues, and have given rise to new forms of political activism. These trends have wide-ranging consequences for Chinese politics. While no nationwide protest movements have occurred since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, hundreds of local demonstrations or 'mass incidents' take place every day, keeping the theme of social stability firmly on the agenda.

Although the media sector has evolved by leaps and bounds in the past two decades, the impact that the internet can conceivably have on Chinese politics should not be exaggerated. In the Chinese context, it is important to remember that in the People's Republic of China the main purpose of the media has never been to transmit information, but rather to propagate political messages. Moreover, Chinese internet censorship has been able – thus far at least – to keep up with the technological development.

In order to stay on top of the situation, China spends large sums on internet control. In the broader context, the sum dedicated to all forms of internal security (769.1 billion yuan) in last year's state budget exceeded the amount allocated to national defence (740.2 billion yuan). No doubt due to the sensitivity surrounding the issue, the total budget for internal security was not announced for 2014 according to the same standards as previous years, although defence expenditure was declared to amount to 808 billion yuan.

## State-society relations in the information age

China's political organization as an authoritarian state, and the missing electoral link between public opinion and the composition of the government, limit the scope of the input from the general public. Although the Chinese political system and the political culture still frame the extent to which public opinion can count in policymaking, the general consensus is that it is of increasing significance. Chinese state-society relations are in a constant state of flux, and new information technologies, coupled with the complex foreign policy environment, have opened up possibilities for new actors to influence decisions.

In the complex foreign policy environment, the media influence policymaking by shaping public opinion and by transmitting public views to politicians. Thus, the relationship between the media and the Party is no longer one-directional, but has become dynamic and bi-directional. Although the nexus between the media and political control remains asymmetrical, the changing relationship has given the media power in terms of agenda-setting, choosing policy options in concrete cases, speeding up the pace of policymaking, and even influencing the final decisions in the field of China's foreign relations, which have traditionally been considered to be under strict Party control.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to public opinion, some argue that it is narrowing the space within which the foreign policy elite are able to operate. One specific example of public influence is a commonly held belief that 'rising nationalism' is a key factor behind China's increasingly assertive foreign policy and souring relations with Japan, as the Chinese leadership is now 'forced' to listen to the public and its nationalistic views.

In the early 2000s, internet users and online communities engendered a phenomenon dubbed 'internet nationalism' in which anti-Japanese material in particular was discussed in discussion forums such as the *Strong Country Forum*. It also gave rise to online activism, which has not been without

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1 Wang, Jianwei and Xiaojie Wang. 2014. "Media and Chinese Foreign Policy." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23 (86), 216–235.

its policy implications. For example, in 2003 anti-Japan activists collected 90,000 signatures in order to prevent the adoption of Japanese technology in the Beijing–Shanghai high-speed railroad project. Although negotiations with the Japanese were well underway, China declined the Japanese option at the last minute, arguably because of public pressure.<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, the internet was instrumental in organizing anti-Japanese demonstrations, effectively turning online demands into offline action. While Chinese state actors can also use nationalism to their own advantage, for example by increasing societal coherence through patriotic education, the Party is well aware that the bottom-up popular forms of nationalism can also serve to turn public opinion against it. Millions of people have been involved in online nationalism, and the public has often accused government policies of being too weak in respect of China's relations with Japan and the US.

Although the public opinion and foreign policy nexus needs to be studied further, it seems safe to assume that, owing to the prevailing lack of a systematic understanding of the mechanisms in action, the relevance of public opinion in authoritarian contexts depends on how the policy elite perceive it. In China, the regime could be more sensitive to nationalistic opinion due to a fear of anti-foreign protests turning into protests against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Strong opinions expressed online can be linked to a willingness to protest on the streets, which is a risk Chinese leaders are often loath to take. Thus, although the leadership knows that the extreme opinions expressed online hardly represent the average Chinese, politicians have begun to see the media and the internet as being representative of 'public views'.<sup>3</sup>

The '2010 Society Blue Paper', published by the State Council-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, described the internet as an important public arena for debate, and defined those netizens who are particularly concerned about news and current affairs, and who regularly express their views online, as the 'new opinion class' (*xin yijian ceng*).<sup>4</sup> Some leaders also hold normative beliefs about the need to respect people's views. In addition, public opinion can be used tactically to give weight to one's own political ideas in times of elite political struggle, which are typical in the early years of a new leadership.

When it comes to highly salient issues, the political leadership often feels that a degree of public support is needed for policies to be conducted successfully. At the very least, public views seem to allow greater leeway for possible actions, making the leaders follow not only the logic of consequences but also the logic of appropriateness. Chinese politicians cite public opinion as a factor to consider in foreign policy formulation, and as difficult to bypass especially in issues of high importance, such as those related to Japan. According to former vice-foreign minister and current ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, Chinese 'diplomacy is no longer the business of a few elite people. It is increasingly embedded in the public and public opinion'.<sup>5</sup> Politicians also report that they follow online discussion forums and sometimes even participate in the discussions themselves.

### The media and public opinion

In addition to taking the general public's views into account, the Party-state aims to influence their formation, not least for societal stability reasons. As in

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2 Gries, Peter H.. 2005. "China's 'New Thinking' on Japan." *The China Quarterly* 184 (4), 846–847. For a more recent analysis of internet nationalism, see Shen, Simon and Shaun Breslin. 2010. *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

3 Gang, Qian and David Bandurski. 2011. "China's Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialisation, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition." In Susan Shirk (ed.) *Changing Media, Changing China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 38–76.

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4 Zhu, Huaxin, Xuegang Shan and Jiangchun Hu. 2010. "2009 Zhongguo Hulanwang Yuqing Fenxi Baogao." (2009 China Internet Public Opinion Analysis Report). In *2010 Shehui Lanpishu* (2010 Society Blue Paper). CASS. Available at <http://yq.people.com.cn/htmlArt/Art392.htm>. Accessed 27 August 2014.

5 David Shambaugh's interview with Cui Tiankai 6 July 2010. In Shambaugh, David. 2013. *China Goes Global. The Partial Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 66.

other countries, the media provides a lens through which the public can interpret the broader domestic and international events, and in China its freedom is severely restricted for political reasons. In other words, despite the increasingly complex and multi-voiced policymaking, public views are still subject to limitations both in terms of freedom of expression and access to information, which constrains independent opinion formation. In 2014 China was ranked number 175/180 in the press freedom index compiled by Reporters without Borders.

Media censorship largely applies to news content that is considered political. The CCP's Propaganda Department has general guidelines on political reporting, defining some topics such as foreign and domestic politics, national unity and social stability as sensitive or sanctioned. Reporting on these should either be left wholly to state-owned media outlets, or carried out in accordance with the Party line. To facilitate control, all news media are state-owned and all major newspapers, radio and television stations are required to register under state organizations.

The more popular the news outlet is, the more likely it is to be politically controlled, with the result that television is one of the most controlled media in China. In general, the Chinese public rely heavily on television as a source of information, as exemplified in the Pew Global Attitudes Project survey from 2009, in which the vast majority of respondents reported getting most of their news through television (72%). China Central Television (CCTV) dominates television broadcasting, and the CCTV's main news report is shown on almost all TV channels at 7pm. In the Pew data from 2009, newspapers were the second most popular source of news (35%). Newspapers can be roughly divided into non-official papers, which rely exclusively on advertising revenues, and so-called official papers, which still receive limited government subsidies. The political sensitiveness of an issue is the deciding factor in how freely papers can write about it, meaning in practice that in the most sensitive cases commercial outlets have to repeat the Xinhua News Agency's version.

Mentioning topics classified as 'sensitive' can lead to warnings from the Central Propaganda Department and the eventual closure of the media organization in question. For example, the academic journal

*Strategy and Management* (Zhanlue yu guanli) and *China Youth Daily's* weekend issue, *Freezing Point* (Bingdian), were closed down in 2004 and 2006 respectively because they failed to follow the Party line. In less severe cases, only some of the personnel are dismissed. For example in August 2011, Chen Zhong, the President of *Window on the South* (Nanfeng Chuang), a Guangzhou-based bi-weekly magazine, lost his position because he allowed the magazine to publish a critical piece on China's Japan policy.

Moreover, most journalists are Party members, and thus subject to internal Party discipline. Via the so-called nomenklatura system, the Party also has veto rights over appointments to high positions, such as the CEOs of media corporations. Investigative journalists that come up against censorship are sometimes left with no other option than to forward a sensitive piece of news to colleagues in Hong Kong or further afield if they want to make sure the story gets covered.

Despite censorship, the long-term trends have been towards increased access to information, offering multiple viewpoints even on political issues and, as elsewhere, a plethora of entertaining content. A gradual process of media marketization, deregulation and commercialization started in the mid-1990s, which increased the number of media outlets as well as transformed their ownership structures, making producers increasingly dependent on commercial revenues, including government-subsidized outlets to a certain extent. In 2003, the CCP reduced subsidies for official newspapers and ended mandatory subscriptions to official papers. These processes have taken all media outlets closer to a consumer-driven approach to reporting.

Commercialization in China, as elsewhere, may lead at worst to sensationalism and black and white thinking. As Chinese mainstream media is increasingly dependent on commercial revenue, it needs to produce content that appeals to consumers, which in practice often means an increase in news that is regarded as negative from the perspective of the Chinese state. In foreign policy-related reporting, the tone of reports on the US and Japan has turned more negative because of media commercialization. This is not only because commercial papers need to sell, but also because the Party outlets are increasingly dependent on sales. In fact, in the commercial

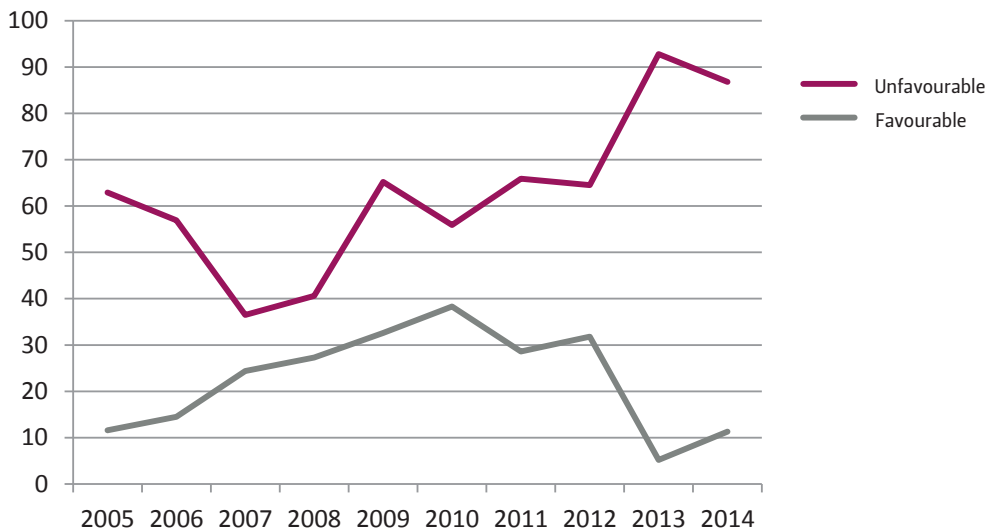


Figure 1: Chinese respondents' general impressions of Japan in the Genron NPO China–Japan opinion polls 2005–2014. Figures are percentages of respondents having favourable or unfavourable impressions of Japan.

media most negative coverage concentrates on the non-sanctioned topics, which makes it possible to simultaneously attract customers and follow media guidelines. Although commercial interests seem to bring official and commercial outlets somewhat closer together, Chinese consumers can still easily differentiate between them, and consumers find the commercial media more credible than the official outlets.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese consumers are interested in international news. One of the commercial success stories has been the *Global Times*, a newspaper dedicated entirely to international news, which has become one of the most profitable publications in China. It was founded by the Party's mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, in 1992, and thanks to its close links with the CCP Propaganda Department, editors working for the *Global Times* have not been dismissed, in contrast to the frequently changing editors in other newspapers reporting on international news. Although its editors deny it, the *Global Times* has been accused of promoting xenophobic nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Chinese television also has an increased focus on international issues and currently broadcasts a

number of talk shows with an international flavour, which increases public awareness of international politics and helps to maintain public interest.

Unsurprisingly, propaganda officials have been concerned about the negative tone of reporting, as it may jeopardize social stability and make conducting foreign relations more difficult. As a result, the general media guidelines restrict reporting on negative issues – especially those that cannot easily be resolved – and recommend promoting 'positive issues' instead.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of reporting on issues related to China's foreign relations, the Propaganda Department has previously tried to steer public opinion in a more positive direction, albeit with little success, especially in the case of Japan. In the 2014 Genron NPO China–Japan opinion poll, almost 90 per cent of Chinese respondents held unfavourable views of Japan, although there was a slight improvement when compared to the data from 2013. Still, when deemed politically useful, state-affiliated outlets may sometimes engage in anti-Japanese reporting, as exemplified in the campaign against Japanese war criminals, which started in July 2014 after Japan reinterpreted its constitution to allow troops to engage in collective self-defence.

6 Stockmann, Daniela. 2013. *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 Shirk, Susan. 2011. "Changing Media, Changing Foreign Policy." In Susan Shirk (ed.) *Changing Media, Changing China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 225–252.

8 Brady, Anne-Marie. 2008. *Marketing Dictatorship. Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 95–98.

## Towards increasing control

Due to the censorship of traditional media outlets, people regard the internet as one of the last resorts offering a channel for less censored conversation. The internet has been commercially available in China since the mid-1990s, and the number of users is constantly increasing, although the pace has diminished somewhat in the past two years. The number of internet users reached 618 million at the end of 2013, according to a report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). In other words, around half of Chinese citizens use the internet, although younger and more educated people are over-represented in this group: In 2013 over half of internet users were male, half were under 30 years old, and the largest occupational group comprised students (26%). For the well-educated, the internet is also the primary channel for news. For example, in the 2012 Beijing-Tokyo poll, over 60 per cent of students cited the internet as one of the main sources of information on Japan.

Despite the massive online censorship efforts, the ever-changing technological possibilities in combination with the growing number of internet users call for a prompt response from the authorities. In the 2013 Pew Global Attitudes survey, almost all the respondents reported owning a mobile phone and, of these, almost 40 per cent had a smartphone. According to CNNIC figures, the largest growth among internet users has been in the usage of mobile solutions, to which end over 70 per cent of new users surfed the internet via their mobile phones last year. This trend increases internet accessibility for less advantaged groups in Chinese society and has to be factored into the already complex surveillance system because the widespread mobility makes it harder to censor information.

Due to increasing internet usage, the Communist Party has to balance between allowing commercial and modernization-driven uses of the internet to develop in order to foster economic growth, and clamping down on the possibilities for protest movements to be organized online. Some companies such as Google have found it too difficult to operate in the Chinese online environment, which led to its decision to shut down the Chinese search engine in March 2010. There have also been hopes that the development of the internet would be a

long revolution leading to democracy, or at least to political change of some sort, but the present situation does not support such hopes, at least in the short term. The hype has been generated in part on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, but at the moment there is insufficient evidence that micro-blogging would offer a qualitatively distinct tool to advance political change in China, as Weibo uses most of the same online monitoring tools as other online services.<sup>9</sup>

Various forms of internet censorship are in use, which can be divided into three main types. First, the Great Firewall blocks certain websites from operating in the country altogether, although it can be bypassed with Virtual Private Network (VPN) applications. Second, certain words are blocked to limit the spread of undesirable content. Keyword blocking, however, is not very efficient as internet users are skillful when it comes to developing euphemisms for banned words.<sup>10</sup>

There are countless ways to come up with new euphemisms as in addition to words sounding similar to those censored, Chinese characters make it possible to use words that look similar to censored ones although they are unrelated in meaning. As politically sensitive situations evolve, so does the list of banned words. One additional strategy is to use images, which are harder to censor. For example in June 2013, the 'big yellow duck' was banned in China because of a picture circulating on microblogs in which the famous 'tank man' Tiananmen Square picture was modified by replacing the tanks with Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman's yellow rubber ducks, one of which had been on display in Hong Kong harbour earlier in 2013.

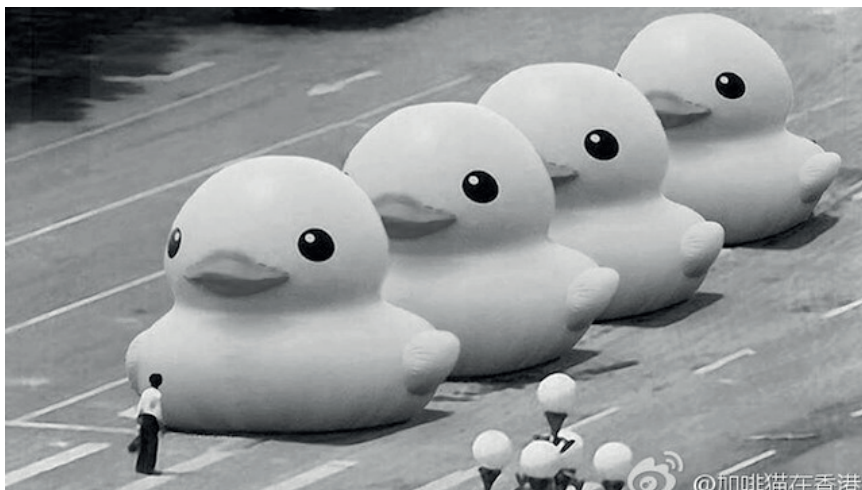
Third, online material can be censored based on the content of the message posted. This can happen on various levels. All online discussion forums have moderators whose duty is to monitor discussions

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9 Sullivan, Jonathan. 2013. "China's Weibo: Is faster different?" *New Media & Society*. 16 (1), 24-37.

10 For more information on keyword control, see Elmer, Keegan. 2012. "Battle Lines in the Chinese Blogosphere. Keyword Control as a Tactic in Managing Mass Events." FIIA Working Paper 76, 1-39.

Spreading of this picture on Chinese microblogs led to the banning of the search term 'big yellow duck' in 2013.



and remove messages violating restrictions. The Chinese internet police have millions of online officers making sure the moderators do a proper job, and if they do not, the service can be closed down. According to a seminal study on Chinese online censorship by Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts, around 13 per cent of all social media posts are censored, which generally happens immediately after a volume surge in postings on the topic in question. Central to the findings of King et al. is that content is censored mainly because of its action potential rather than due to criticism of the Communist Party as such.<sup>11</sup>

Jingjing and Chacha, cartoon mascots depicting the online police, frequently patrol popular web portals and clicking on them leads to the Internet Police section of the Public Security website, making it easy for any internet user to report banned content. Finally, in addition to censorship, the Communist Party has hired millions of so-called 'fifty cent citizens' (*wumao dang*), who present themselves as ordinary people and write comments favouring the Party line in order to steer any potentially inflammatory discussions in a more moderate direction.

In addition to the above-mentioned censorship mechanisms that have been in use for years, the authorities are tightening their grip on online discussions. Recent statements by top Chinese politicians reveal that they believe the internet is integral

to controlling the public in the future. In February 2014, China announced the establishment of Central Internet Security and Information Leading Group to monitor Chinese cyberspace, headed by President Xi Jinping. After the first meeting of the new group, Xi emphasized that without internet security there is no national security but that there also cannot be modernisation without information.<sup>12</sup>

The main reasons cited for enhanced cyber control were terrorism and ethnic separatism. After the 2009 Ürümqi riots, the internet was shut down for several months in Xinjiang and the situation in China's Uyghur area has been unstable lately. Nevertheless, the internet penetration rate throughout China as a whole is so high today that managing the online behaviour of the wider population must have been one of the reasons for the stricter approach as well. For example, the leadership's attempts to control online discussions led to the criminalization of defamatory social media posts in September 2013. According to Xinhua, defamatory social media posts that are viewed by more than 5,000 netizens or retweeted more than 500 times can lead to prison sentences of up to three years. The first such conviction was in April 2014.

### Concluding remarks

It is extremely difficult to assess the extent to which Chinese politicians are influenced by public opinion. It may happen that occasional references to public

11 King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2), 326–343.

12 Xinhua. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/27/c\\_119538719.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/27/c_119538719.htm). Accessed 10 June 2014.



opinion or the public mood are just a rhetorical tool for increasing political support. On the other hand, the fact that the CCP defined maintaining its power as the first core national interest (*hexin liyi*) in 2010, followed by the tightening of internet control during Xi Jinping's leadership, speaks for the utmost importance attached to social stability and public opinion management issues.

The commercialisation of the traditional media has complicated public opinion management from the CCP's perspective, because even if media outlets follow the guidelines on sanctioned issues, the negative tone used when reporting on non-sanctioned issues has spill-over effects on the views people tend to hold on sanctioned issues as well. Moreover, as the government-subsidised media outlets have to compete with commercial media for revenue, they have also adopted a new style of reporting. For example, the tone adopted by the Global Times when reporting on Japan or Chinese military developments often goes beyond mere flirtation with nationalistic ideas.

The internet has the potential to empower groups in China to acknowledge their common interests, which can lead to collective action offline. Online nationalism is an example of this. Still, estimates of the speed and volume with which social media applications can challenge online censorship would appear to be exaggerated, or premature at least.

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ISBN 978-951-769-427-8

ISSN 1795-8059

Cover: Beijing Patrol/Flickr. The image is a cartoon character depicting the online police patrolling the internet.

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

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