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Democracy Inaction:  
Problematizing New Media and the Internet in Contemporary China and Japan

In the constantly evolving landscape of East Asia, it is sometimes hard to define and classify the role of the media. The media is responsible not only for serving as a voice of the people, but also for delivering news abroad, essentially accountable for the way we as foreigners view and understand the changes that are taking place around the world. The media of East Asia has great influence for us simply because our own knowledge and insight is limited by what we are able to ascertain from available media outlets. Therefore, as Americans places more and more of a vested interest in the affairs of Asia, it is imperative to study and respond to the changes that are developing in the media, because it affects the way we get our news. Furthermore the growth of China as it compares to Japan has become an important issue in contemporary society. Although both countries are developing at a very rapid rate, their methods are quite different, and are perhaps indicative of the role the media is playing in shaping the formation of a social consciousness, especially in the youth population.

In both China and Japan, the media has undergone many changes in the last forty years and has taken on a number of distinct roles. However, it is still unclear if and how the media acts as a force for motivating social change among the populace. Even with the advent of new media and the Internet, it does not seem as if the proliferation and application of democracy in the region has undergone substantial changes as a result. In fact, though the media has strong democratic potential, it is still too highly controlled and

regulated by the government to fully take flight. Similarly, by catering largely to the youth demographic, its audience is fragmented and apathetic, resulting in limited means for the promulgation of a democratic identity. By comparing and contrasting the examples of China and Japan, this paper will give a brief history of the development and evolution of the media in these respective countries as well as account for the influx of new media and its effect on the traditional landscape. I will then draw some conclusions on the legitimacy of these changes, whether or not they are warranted and where the problems lie in our interpretations. Finally, I will conclude with some observations on why their potential for democracy still remains largely insignificant and the possible future implications for how democracy might be shaped in East Asia at the hands of the media.

In order to understand the state of democracy in China and Japan, it is important first to look at the growth of civil society in both areas. As Guobin Yang describes, “a robust civil society is often taken as a basis for democratic politics” (2003: 406). To that end, there are three main democracy-enhancing features that Keiko Hirata attests are at play in any well-functioning civil society: first, it presents a way for those excluded from power to articulate, aggregate, and represent their interests; second, it acts as an instrument to contain the power of democratic governments by checking their potential abuses and violations of the law, and subjecting them to public scrutiny; and third, it allows a rich associational life to supplement the role of political parties in stimulating political participation and democratic culture (2004: 118-19). Critical too in the development of civil society is the concept of the public sphere. According to Jurgen Habermas’s definition, public sphere has four main components, namely to include a

certain disregard or equalization of status, to challenge the status quo, to be inclusive but not commodified, and finally, to engage in rational discussion, such that the public sphere acts as a kind of “sounding board” for problems that are necessarily processed by the political system (1989: 36-7). Laurie Freeman echoes the sentiment that civil society ideally features public sphere prominently, in addition to “a wide-ranging and active network of voluntary associations, tolerance for diversity, and a voice for marginalized groups” (2003: 255). However, she also maintains that Japan is not on the track toward establishing that kind of civil society because these characteristics have been weak in the country relative to other advanced industrial nations. China also struggles to maintain such a civil society. Yang writes that, “as a civil society institution, public sphere remains insipient and weak, social organizations lack autonomy from the state, and because organized protest is under strict government control, social movements do not have a legitimate existence” (2003: 456). Grounding the contemporary idea of civil society under the theoretical framework laid out by Habermas, it is clear that both China and Japan are finding it difficult to adapt to the way democratic inclinations are affecting the quest for a more efficient form of civil society.

The question that these two countries may be asking themselves now is what role the media takes in facilitating democracy. Susan Pharr writes that there are three main interpretations of the media’s role in a civil society: first, it acts as a spectator and a conduit for the flow of information; second, it emerges as a major independent force in politics or more simply, as a “watchdog” to protect the public interest; and third, it is seen as a servant of the state, which forms a consensus on social and political values to generate support for a regime (1996: 5). Relating back to democracy more specifically,

the “watchdog” motif can also be translated a number of different ways, media as a *guard dog*, providing citizens with information to construct their own political and social consciousness, as a *guide dog* in educating citizens about public affairs, and as a *lap dog*, a largely ignored role that allows the government to communicate with the public to mobilize support (Krauss 2000: 273). As a result, the media can really run the gamut in terms of how ingrained and integral it wants to act in bringing about democratic reform. On one end of the spectrum, it can remain very loyal to government interest, while on the other, it can cater directly to the people and serve the public need. This is all heightened by the fact that the media has such a strong influence on politics. Most academics today agree that, “the information revolution generally and the growth of the media more specifically have had a profound impact on politics, culture, and society in advanced industrial democracies” (Pharr 1996: 5). However, there is the hope that new media specifically can work to solve and sort out some of these issues, in that it has “the potential to proliferate civil connectedness and participation necessary for the functioning of a healthy democracy in ways that more traditional media cannot” (Freeman 2003: 255). In China, we can see the intense oscillation of the role of the media in a historical context as well as the efforts that it is now making to reform as they relate to democracy.

The search for democracy in China has undergone multiple iterations, each replete with tragedy, starting with the CCP’s class-based claim to democracy, the Cultural Revolution’s assertion of the spread of “mass democracy,” and finally Deng Xiaoping’s promise of democracy when he came to power in 1978. Since then, the notion of democracy has assumed various characteristics, of being popular and participatory in the 70s, assuming a more liberal and elitist bent in 1989, and recently, of taking on more

complicated dimensions with “accelerated capitalist developments, deepened social stratification, and the replacement of students and intellectuals by disenfranchised workers, peasants, and Falun Gong practitioners as the main forces of social contestation” (Zhao 2001: 21-22). Throughout these transformations, the government has squelched all forms of popular democratic uprising including the ’78-’79 Democracy Wall movement and the student-led pro-democracy movement of 1989. This makes sense, given that the history of the Chinese government’s stance on democracy has been one of such contestation. The “mass propaganda and persuasion model” was the frame used to analyze the Chinese media as controlled by the Party and it became clear that they “were tightly controlled instruments of political indoctrination and mass mobilization” (Zhao 1998: 4). This was so much the case that by the time of the Cultural Revolution, all but 43 regular newspapers existed in the entire country, and all were distributed by the Party’s mass organizations (Zhao 1998: 17).

In the late 1970s, the dialogue began to take on greater depth, since China experienced the beginnings of a media reform. It started as an attempt to return to earlier ideals of the Party press, like “seeking truth from facts,” and media increasingly began to take on a role of stressing business information and entertainment, which hadn’t been the case in the past. It wasn’t until the mid-1980s though that media reform reached a new level. Efforts were made to separate government administration from Party ideological thought, decreasing the influence of the state in nearly every aspect of life. Additionally, news that criticized the daily work of authorities and the wrongdoing of officials increased and human-interest stories began to spread (Zhao 1998: 34-5). Press freedom and press legislation began to proliferate as hot topics, in that they questioned the

dominant monopoly of journalism by the CCP and even went so far as to sympathize with student youth pro-democracy movements, a trend that has irrevocably stopped in the decades since. In fact, Yuezhi Zhao points to the fact that “democratization was the issue in the struggle for media reform in 1989” (1998: 1). Hu Jiwei, former editor-in-chief of the *People’s Daily* argued that press freedom would help to establish the democratic authority of the Chinese political leadership, and that only through these means would free press be a truly democratic authority supported by the people (Zhao 1998: 37).

However, despite efforts on Hu’s part, as well as other initiatives like the construction of journalism laws and the call for independent newspapers, the democratization of media communication met its match under the authority of the government. Commercialization in media fueled corruption—red packets of cash were exchanged for promotional reporting—which was then substantiated by the Party’s purging of media outlets especially after Tiananmen and the removal of controversial journalists. News media that advocated for being watchdogs of the people soon became corrupt themselves because party decision to wean them off state-sponsorship made them open to competitive market forces and essentially allowed media content to be bought by those who could afford it (Zhao 2001: 32-3). It wasn’t until economic reforms and an open-door policy in the ‘90s with the CCP’s embrace of a market economy that China again saw the rise of a fledgling journalism reform movement and the emergence of discourse on media democratization (Zhao 1998: 2).

All of this points to some of the inadequacies and faults of traditional media in the Chinese landscape, largely because China still grapples with attaining autonomy of the press from state control. For China’s massive population, its print media reaches only a

tiny percentage—only about 35.7 copies printed per 1,000 people in 1998. Special-interest papers that have a bent towards alternative news coverage in the realm of women’s issues, labor rights, etc. have had limited editorial independence and have declined markedly in circulation and influence in the ‘90s. Zhao describes television in China as being “served with a diet of state propaganda and mass entertainment” (2001: 38), although he acknowledges that there have been changes, namely an increase in the variety of cultural and entertainment forms and the reduction of explicitly propagandist content. However, Zhao notes, that does not mean that the media is no longer doing ideological work or is still politically dominating. Furthermore, these media tend to serve and cater to only a small portion of the population, ultimately those that are wealthy enough to buy the papers and those who dwell in urban-centers, so they do not represent the varied and multi-faceted range of the Chinese landscape.

It would seem them with such flaws in the way traditional media has coped over the decades that China would embrace and take up the Internet as a media outlet that could finally unite its people. And there are certainly a number of good things to say about how the Internet has done just that. Yang articulates some of the strengths of the Internet’s role in contemporary China by first writing that, “with respect to China’s public sphere, the social uses of the Internet have fostered public debate and problem articulation” (2003: 453). To that end, we can return to Habermas’s definition of public sphere and understand how integral it is to the formation of civil society as well as democracy. Whereas Habermas talked of the importance of communal meeting places such as *salons* and coffee houses as a way of connecting people through publications (1989: 36), Yang seems to have upgraded the language of the public sphere to the world

of the Internet in emphasizing the importance of chatrooms and forums as means of public discourse. All of these serve to foster discussion on democratic processes and provide alternative spaces for public debate. Yang also notes that, “the Internet has shaped social organizations by expanding old principles of association, facilitating the activities of existing organizations and creating a new associational form, the virtual community” (2003: 453). The Internet has in effect consolidated citizens’ right to free speech, and in virtual communities, almost no topic is off-limits, leading to a rise of awareness of ordinary issues all the way up to posts about “corruption, unemployment, education, and social welfare,” which “appear quite often” (Yang 2003: 468). As a result, social ties are forged online that carry over into the real world, increasing the possibility for social mobilization among Internet users.

Furthermore, Yang speaks to the possibilities the Internet opens in the dynamics of protest, one of the cornerstones of democracy. He writes that the Internet lends itself perfectly to popular protest because “it helps to disseminate information, formulate goals and strategies, identify opponents, and organize protest events...speedily, at low costs, and without incurring personal risks” (2003: 472). For all of these reasons, critics argue the superiority of the Internet over more traditional news outlets like television and print media in the ability to bring about democracy. Stephanie Fahey writes that, “new media can remove economic barriers which exist with established mediums,” and that “people turn to the Internet when they require alternative sources of information...when the established media in not providing unbiased information” (2005: 104). Yang seconds that, in so far as people rate the Internet more highly “in terms of freedom of expressing views and for exchanging views with others” (2003: 464) than more traditional media.

However, like all things, the Internet too has its drawbacks, and with regard to the proliferation of democratic ideals, its shortcomings override the extent to which it can be seen as an altogether beneficial media source. Like with other news media, the state of the Chinese government makes it hard for the Internet to thrive without the necessary precautions of censorship. Despite maneuvering around filters in chatrooms, overwhelmingly the government is still able to block about 10% of all websites around the world (Fahey 2005: 99). It uses harsh laws, stiff jail sentences, and crackdowns on Internet cafés to block websites like CNN, BBC, and Human Rights Watch, which it deems “subversive,” all in an effort to repress free expression online (Gomez 2004: 7). The Party, given its own political history, “knows all too well the importance of communication in the mobilization of social movements” (Zhao 2001: 40) and thus has no issue with stepping up control over the Internet if needed (Yang 2003: 474). Additionally, there is the issue that, like more traditional media, accelerated commercialization and market consolidation will turn the Internet into a commodity that can be bought and sold by the highest bidder, making its content subject to self-interested individuals instead of the public good.

Furthermore, the current demographic of the Internet is too limited to allow for the necessary unifying effects of grassroots participation meant to mobilize and inspire democracy through social change. Although the Internet had 20 million users in China in 2000, most were confined to affluent city dwellers who are far removed from a significant portion of the population (Zhao 2001: 38). Additionally, 80% of Internet users in 2000 were between 18 and 24 with a bias toward men, and with changes limited primarily to the urban middle class from the more developed coastal regions (Fahey

2005: 98). In this way, the tiny political elite and mostly urban-based middle class have become the most favored media clients, and the Internet has come to neglect the struggles of those without the means to access it. Zhao points to the fact that, “though liberal media scholars continue to describe how the market has undermined the Chinese ‘propaganda state,’ they have been generally silent about the class orientations of the new media structure” (2001: 38). In his way, it makes it difficult for mass media to serve as a vehicle of communication across different social groups. This so-called “digital divide” wedges a stake in between the “have’s” and the “have not’s” and disenfranchises those other “outside” groups (including most of China’s population) on the basis of income, age, and gender (Fahey 2005: 104).

The effect of new media on China is that the state of democracy has become fragmented. While some believe that workers must be sacrificed for the good of prosperity and freedom, others deplore the unequal social hierarchy and advocate Western-style democracy, while still others are fighting for economic freedom through privatization and marketization (Zhao 2001: 35). Even those who fought for democracy in 1989 understood that the movement was founded along elitist, exclusionary, and leftist lines such that people petitioned for economic freedom and freedom of the press, for instance, more strongly than they did for peasant rights. Inherently, there were many voices that were not heard in the movement, most (older, female, low-income, rural) who are still silenced today as a result of the polarizing effects of the Internet. Furthermore, the anonymous nature of the Internet lends itself to a greater preponderance of extreme views, especially xenophobic ones against America and Japan, that may be more of a “destructive force in international relations than a positive force for democracy” (Fahey

2005: 105). Despite the likely conclusion that “diffusion of the Internet will challenge undemocratic state behavior and enhance pluralism” (Yang 2003: 409), democracy will be inherently flawed in China so long as the people are not united. The Internet may be doing its part in the way of promoting democratic ideals, but because they do not yet reach everyone, it will be nearly impossible to create the same potential for democracy that came out of the mobilization efforts of Tiananmen.

The history of media in Japan meanwhile follows a slightly more straightforward path than that of China. Over the period of 1868 to the end of WWII, the media’s relationship to the Japanese government changed, but it can largely be characterized as strongly embodying a “servant” tradition to the state, ever since the Meiji state originally conceived newspapers as an instrument of state policy, and the military war-state of 1937 further enhanced that sentiment (Pharr 1996: 11-2). However, the Allied Occupation during the year of 1945 to 1952 redefined media as vehicles to convey their own policies of democratization and revitalize the capitalist state. Persistent efforts of the press to resist censorship measures also established a legacy for a “watchdog” role in the postwar era. From there, it expanded rapidly in an increasingly educated and prosperous information society. In 1947, Japanese media was guaranteed freedom of the press, a right that China is still fighting for, and thus operates free from state control, but still puts constraints on what the public is allowed to know. Recently, the role of Japanese media has evolved into more of a spectator because of struggle against censorship and the “norms of neutrality that have been stringently maintained in Japan by television and by newspapers” (Pharr 1996: 7).

However, that does not shortchange the immensely important and influential role that the media plays in Japan, especially as compared with China. Japan leads the world in the information and the breadth of coverage and sophistication of the media. 90% of the population reads newspapers on a daily basis, and its per-capita newspaper circulation of 581 copies per 1,000 people is the highest in the world (Pharr 1996: 4-5). Media have a large following in Japan and carry great prestige, with television and newspapers carrying greater credibility ratings in Japan than they do in the U.S. NHK (Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) is shown in surveys to be trusted more than any other major institution in Japan, including the Diets, courts, of the government in general. Furthermore, only 20% of the population has been found to see bias in the media, and Japan's media coverage of domestic and international political events "may be more extensive than that of any nation on earth" (Pharr 1996: 5). And despite its highly informed citizenry, the media's influence did not give way to greater political instability as it had in China. Though it is often seen as taking a "spectator" role, some have even come to see the Japanese media as watchdogs, serving as the equivalent of an opposition party in offering continuous critique of those in power from the environmental pollution cases of the '60s all the way up to the '90s.

The role of newspapers and television also take on new characteristics in Japan. Newspapers are praised by Ellis Krauss as contributing towards democratic norms by "providing a check on those in power and setting the political agenda" (2000: 266). He goes on to say that, "Japanese national press has been a particularly valuable instrument to the state in transforming it from authoritarianism to democracy all while educating the populace" (2000: 273-74). Television started as a medium with much less impact, simply

to complement newspapers with a more conservative bent, and aimed at the lower classes. More political exposure existed in newspapers than it had on television (Krauss 2000: 280). However, in the early '90s, television became more opinionated do in large part to anchor's and journalist's expressing more of their personal opinions or comments on the air leading up to the 1993 election. Krauss even goes so far as to say that, "clearly, the 1990s saw the arrival of a new and popular style of television journalism in Japan" (2000: 290), and points to three key factors that led to the transformation of television to hold a greater political impact: first, commercial stations' move in strength into television news journalism and the success of their opinionated news style; second, the appearance of Japanese politicians who recognized the political potential of television; and third, the Liberal Democratic Party's fragmentation and its resultant prospective loss of power.

But like China, there are problems in traditional Japanese media that prevent it from having as far-reaching a democratic effect as its potential might otherwise suggest. Freeman writes that, "Japan falls short of this theoretical ideal—during the postwar period, communication and the public sphere have been largely demobilized and denatured, not allowing for the conflict to come from the periphery to the center of the political system" (2003: 236). There is other evidence for the authoritative role that the government plays in regulating and controlling media content. Through institutional linkages with the mass media, it has the ability to define the media's agenda and delineate the realm of civil society. And like in China, there is evidence that media conglomerates in Japan have a financial backing, and thus create a bias for favoring the status quo. Furthermore, newspapers tend to propagate a "pack journalism" aesthetic because journalistic norms emphasize strict neutrality in coverage of stories, making newspaper

content very uniform (Krauss 2000: 270-71). Additionally, the nature of Japanese news gathering involves reporters stationed in *kisha* clubs, which are thought to compromise media independence by fostering “insider” bonds between journalists and their sources (Pharr 1996: 8-9). Because of this, Japan’s society suffers from a lack of alternative content and coverage in the available mediums.

In the past two decades, the Internet has suggested the emergence of an alternative mechanism “through which civil society and the public sphere might independently be able to influence the political process” (Freeman 2003: 237). People have begun to realize that they cannot solely rely on the government and its resources to protect their well being, and instead turn to the Internet as an access to global information to allow for underrepresented issues like human rights, democracy, and humanitarian assistance to gain credence in Japan (Hirata 2004: 114). Like the rise of the Internet in China, it also creates the possibility for public discourse and dialogue on these issues in spaces like forums and chatrooms. Freeman points to three main ways in which the Internet can empower the political public sphere in Japan: first, it can be used for grassroots activism by allowing local and international activists and volunteers the ability to globally broadcast information about their cause and raise money; second, it provides a potential link between the government and the public over information; and third, it can be used as a means for individuals, groups, and candidates to carry out meaningful exchanges of views during election periods (2003: 243). The Internet has also become a tool where voters can reach out to politicians and understand their platforms more directly without the harsh restrictions set on newspaper byline lengths and television airtime. Today,

Japan also boasts the largest number of Internet users in any country outside of the U.S., and provides youth with a means to engage with an international online community.

But similar to the problems China is facing, the concentrated demographic of Internet users in Japan may also prove to be its downfall for the hope of sparking a democratic revolution. People have worried about the possibility of a “digital divide” in the rise of Internet users in predominantly wealthier, more educated urban centers. Additionally, the Internet tends to favor youth, but Japan has significantly less of a youth population than most other countries, including China (28% vs. 35% of people between 20 and 39), and is also facing a severe aging population problem (Freeman 2003: 249). Because of this, penetration among users is the highest in Asia at 50%, but the rate of increase is the slowest because of the declining number of youth (Fahey 2005: 101). Furthermore, unlike in China, uses of the Internet have stalled in the way of real political activism in Japan, with much of its functions limited to consumer spending, social networking, and gaming. Additionally, Habermas and other critics caution that the Internet may be “socially isolating” in that it replaces the face-to-face contact that is so vital for communication in the public sphere. Finally, the role of the state is still that of a reactionary one—online surveillance is carried out by both governments and corporations. In Japan, the Communications Interception Law was passed in August 1999 and allowed law enforcement officials access to private e-mail accounts if they were investigating certain types of crime (Gomez 2004: 11). Unlike in the U.S. and elsewhere, public access to key government database is also still limited so as to discourage complete government transparency and the spread of democratic mobilization.

The barriers that are put in place by the Japanese government as well as the lack of necessary means and motivation on the part of youth combine to lessen the media's effect on democratic potential. Despite the influence of the media, surveys have found it to have little direct influence on political attitudes and behavior of voters, but more simply as a means to stimulate ideas through exposure. For example, Krauss points to the fact that, "heavy exposure to television did not seem to weaken partisanship, increase voter votability, or lessen interest in politics" (2000: 286). This, along with disillusionment with corruption and scandals may have contributed to the marked voter turnout for the 1996 election, the lowest, in fact, of any election in Japan's postwar period under its new and more democratic electoral system (Freeman 2003: 236). It may be that the public no longer believes that it has the power to bring about political or social change, despite the influx of new media. Fahey reasons that Japanese youth are more interested in issues closer to home, those of patriarchy, gender alignment and filial piety, as well as more macro issues of nationalism (2005: 90). She further points to a number of key reasons why the youth in particular might adopt this sentiment, stemming from an underrepresented demographic, the inherent ageism of Japanese society, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the older and more conservative generations, the gerrymander in rural electorates, and the dominance of public service, all of which are hard to change by voting (2005: 100).

In the world as we know it today, the sanctions put on media by the government are constantly under fire. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the threat of terrorism has been used as justification for increased security measures at the expense of freedom of expression. As a result, despite the trends toward a more free and open space for new media like the

Internet, it is still difficult to sway public opinion towards democratic initiative. In fact, Asia has been declared the “world’s largest prison for journalists, cyber dissidents and Internet users” (Gomez 2004: 1). China has the biggest number of Internet-users in prison, with 48 as of 2004. For this reason, people are largely reluctant to conduct political communication that might get them into trouble and do not use the Internet for its optimal political potential (Gomez 2004: 13).

Like more traditional media before it, the Internet has been subject to similar measures of censorship and restriction at the hands of the state. In China, we find that though the Internet has encouraged a hotbed of political discussion through online forums that had previously not existed, it is still too polarizing a medium to foster unified collaboration of all of China’s people and attempt to consolidate all of their many distinct visions of “democracy.” In Japan, regulations seem as yet to be less stringent, but the population is too fragmented and disinterested to truly take up the political cause. The pool of activist youth is constantly shrinking as a result of an aging population, and it is difficult for others in Japanese society to view and access the Internet with the same political inclination. In both countries, the Internet has yet to benefit enough of the population to encourage collaboration and mobilization. This will truly be the key because, as James Gomez writes, “the crucial ingredients for establishing a full and functioning democracy are an active and politicized citizenry, a vibrant civil society and a state that is attentive to human and civil rights” (2004: 3). Ultimately, the success of a democratic movement will depend on the determination and ingenuity of new media’s users. For now, new media and the Internet present a surprising degree of potential, but it

will still be some time before democratic action can rightly establish itself in China and Japan.

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